

# UNMUTING THE BIBLE

Recovering the Depopularized Vision of God

**Naveen Alapati**

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*To the Broken World  
and  
to my beloved mother  
who struggled to shape us  
despite her shattered life*



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# FOREWORD

What does it take to live a life totally dedicated to Christ and fulfil his will for our small lives? How do we impact our society with the love of Christ? The book “Unmuting the Bible” is about hearing the voice of God afresh, a hearing that will open our minds to a new and different understanding of God and set us on a new track in God’s service. As the title of the book suggests, it is a reading of the biblical message that will unsettle the common perceptions of the Bible and the gospel. It will scrutinize the “imaginary Jesus” that lives in our minds so that we will be open to understanding who the real Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Often the kernel of the biblical message gets submerged in our theological deliberations and traditions. It not only takes courage but also hours of untiring labour to unravel the revelation of God and bring it out for the readers. My friend Naveen has struggled with the biblical texts and the truth of the gospel to unravel its simple and profound message for our turbulent times. The book has an interrogative style of writing, which I hope the readers will find fascinating, as the book will take them along from the creation stories in the first pages of the Bible to the apocalyptic revelations of the new creation.

It is in catching the vision of Christ and understanding his mission, that we can truly fulfil the God-given purpose of our lives. At a time when we have almost domesticated the gospel with our own selfish agendas while keeping the garb of an otherworldly hope, Naveen calls us to hear God anew, catching the glimpse of God’s dynamic nature revealed in Christ, so that we may live revolutionary lives, becoming the body of Christ in a broken world. Such revolutionary lives need revolutionary imaginations of an alternative world. It is in imagining a new world, a new world that the biblical prophets held on to in the midst of the deepest crisis that was sweeping their society, that we can be propelled to repel the present forms of injustice and strive for a new world.

## FOREWORD

The book, for one thing, will shatter the glossy images of the gospel held by us, calling us to embrace the power of Christ and his gospel, becoming the hands and feet of Christ, and seeking to transform the present shape of the world. Let us hear the unmuted voice of God for becoming the voice of God in our world.

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I am thankful to all those who have helped me directly or indirectly in writing this book. I thank God for all the teachers in my life who helped me to expand my horizons and to have fresh insights into theology of the Bible and the practical life. I am grateful to Pr. Philip P. Sam who was one of the first teachers who evoked my thoughts and let me come out of my narrow worldview to explore the Bible more in its terms rather than on my terms. I am also thankful to the dear faculty of India Bible College and Seminary for their efforts in shaping and teaching the students not only to become good Christian ministers but also to be responsive to the crises in the society and the nation. I pray for God's abundant grace and blessings upon them and let them become a blessing for many more.

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Unless specified, all the quotations of the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), anglicised edition, published by Bible Society of India.

I pray that this book will help you in learning something new and in transforming lives.



# PROLOGUE

*When you read the Bible on its own terms, you discover  
that it doesn't behave itself like a holy rulebook should.*

Peter Enns

The Bible. The mention of the name itself evokes different thoughts, convictions, questions, criticisms, debates, dialogues, and many more discussions. For some, it's a pretty personal devotional book, a manual for life, a book of information, an answer book, or a holy rulebook. For some others, it is another ancient myth, a matter of falsity and fluidity prepared and compiled by those ancient geeks who simply wanted to propagate their view, and a book that is no longer scientific, historic, and thus irrelevant. For some other extremists, it is the holy and eternal word of God which cannot be proven errant and fallible, a book of God in which God Himself speaks overrunning the words of human beings, and the final, infallible, and absolute Word of God. Amidst all these views, some struggle with it because of the questions it provokes, who find it strange because of its ancient tunes yet want to listen to what it says and engage in diligent and serious studies to understand what the Bible has to say to us.

Let me begin with this last view. The Bible is strange for many. It introduces us to a *strange God* whom we meet for the first time in history. It tells us a very strange, old, and long story. The Bible itself is not a single book because it has multiple authors, editors, and compilers who bring up multi-layered views about God. They all tell the same story from different perspectives agreeing and disagreeing with the others. Dissonant voices are speaking from all the corners through all the experiences of life. Some of these ancient stories seem to be legendary and exaggerated which might seem insensible to our modern eyes. Those age-old laws seem to be no longer applicable. We struggle to settle with this God and so He is.

Let me bring up some problematic issues with the Church's approaches to the Bible. These problems are not wrong within themselves rather they raise issues when they are overly emphasized. The majority of Christians – Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox streams alike – have reduced the Bible to tell the systematic doctrines of the Church. It is not wrong to excerpt some doctrinal teachings because they are essential for the right order in the faith and practice of the Church yet the Bible's story has much to tell us other than the systematized doctrinal beliefs. It is a story into which all of its readers are invited and challenged to encounter this God.

This God cannot be limited to the systematic definitions because He is more complicated, difficult, and wholly other. The Bible introduces this God to us through the ways how the ancient people have witnessed Him. This God is not a helicopter man who hovers over the people and issues His commands and guidelines to the people so that they can understand Him rather He is more like a *cyclist* who allows Himself to be understood through the story of human beings and their realities. In other words, God gets involved in the story of human beings and of His people. Although He is a wholly other person, He reveals His nature and His characteristics through the medium of human language. His revelations are always perceived through the medium of people's circumstances. The people of ancient times too struggled to understand this God just as we do because this God is not as same as other gods they encountered in the history. God allowed Himself to be told through their story. The Bible is the witness to the revelation of God and serves as a window to look at Him through the eyes of the people of God.

Another problematic approach to the Bible is to see it as *the eternal and final* Word of God. This approach sees the Bible as absolutely scientific and historic. It views inspiration of the Scriptures as the basis of the argument of inerrancy in its theology, historicity, and scientific reliability. However, this is the imposition of the modern fundamentalist views on the Bible. The Bible has human authors who witnessed the work of God in their life and history. They narrate their story as the story of God and vice versa. Though the Bible speaks to us, it is not written *to us*. It has its own cultural, historical, and theological setting and has been communicated well to the ancient audience to whom it has been written. The inspiration of the Scriptures does not necessarily mean that everything in the Bible must be absolutely historic and scientific. To be precise, ancient historiography and ancient science (what we call a *myth*) are very different from the historiography and science of our times. It is vain to reconcile the modern myth (what we call *science*) with this ancient Scriptures and want it to tell what we want it to say.

Another misunderstanding with the Bible is that since the Scriptures are inspired, it is not necessary for biblical studies and biblical education because the Holy Spirit will tell the meaning. This is a very wrong step. Of course, the Holy Spirit will reveal the truth but that doesn't mean that the studies are unnecessary. We are gifted by God with the efficient and eloquent teachers and theologians who are enlightened by the Spirit of God to tell us the meaning of the Scriptures by engaging in serious and diligent study. I have heard enough preachers saying that they are guided by the Holy Spirit yet misinterpreting the biblical text giving it a different meaning than what it says.

Some higher critics tend to reduce the Bible to a piece of ancient literature that has no relevance for the modern world. They just try to blame the Bible for *what it is not*. We need to appreciate the Bible for what it is. It has some message to communicate to us. Be it an ancient document but its message is not outdated. Diving into the biblical vision evokes our imagination to share in the higher vision of the God about whom the Bible narrates. Let the Bible be a myth. But that myth has more power to destroy the illusionary power and wisdom of this world. That myth has a lot of power to transform the world.

Some see the Bible as a mere manual for life or a devotional book for our individualistic faith and practice. But the Bible is not simply a

rulebook that contains a lot of norms that cannot be changed. It is not a simple book for climbing up the spiritual ladder to get acceptance of God. The religion and spirituality of the Bible are more than individualistic faith and practice. It is not a book of answers to all our questions. Instead, it is a wisdom that has more socialistic implications, political visions, and economic dimensions. It speaks of a story of bringing heaven down to earth by partnering with God. It enlightens us with the wisdom of God to live in this world in God's way even when things make no sense. It calls us to be empowered by the Spirit of God to spread the good news that Jesus is the Messiah and the King of the world.

Bible evokes the imagination of the readers. It is not supposed to be read as a mere book of systematic doctrines, scientific and historic facts, rulebook, devotional book or a static word of God. It has a dynamic message and speaks dynamically to all generations although it was written in ancient language to the ancient people. Yet, we need to try to understand the message of the Bible in its original setting so that we can draw its implications rightly and profoundly.

The world in which we live today has been broken apart in a grand sense. There seems to be an order and progression in the world but the present world order is a masked reality of disorder and brokenness. The world is broken because of its own definitions of power, success and progression that appear to be true but by the end of the day, they all appear to be vague and void in stabilizing the world. Claiming to be progressing, we are heading towards our own doom because of our own innovative power and wisdom. The world is full of an unquenchable thirst for power, wealth and pleasure. Power is defined in terms of violence and oppression; success is defined in terms of becoming greater than others; authority is defined in terms of getting service; pleasure is defined in terms of freedom to satisfy carnal desires. All such definitions have played a significant role in creating a society that is individualistic and filled with broken relationships. The world, at least a large portion of the world's population, is in desperate need of healing.

The Bible, in its ancient settings and with an ancient worldview, presents a way of healing to the present world *disorder*. It is to be noted that the religion of the Bible is not about escaping from the realities into a different world. It offers a different vision for our world and presents an alternative way of existence in this world. As it profoundly



communicates this vision, it also calls the readers to partake in that grand vision and start to live in a revolutionary way. In other words, the biblical faith is not a call to forget our realities and engage in ritualistic works to somehow find ourselves in another world instead it calls us to engage with the realities and collaborate with God in realizing that alternative existence as envisaged by God and His people. It is to live in this world with a vision of a transformed world. It is a faith that does not keep us silent but active, not indifferent but revolutionary.

This book, *Unmuting the Bible*, is an attempt to revive this vision and hope which has been almost crippled with the liturgy and fundamentalism of the Church. This is not to show that Christianity alone is a *supreme* religion but to show how the world could become better when everyone on this earth shares in the vision of God. It is an attempt to show how heaven can become a reality on earth through obedience, trust, and faithfulness to God. This book is an outcome of serious study and trying to understand the Bible within the setting of the turbulence, restlessness, and socio-political and religious dysfunctions in our country and our world. I pray that reading this book may help you too to become a part of God's vision and all of us collaborate with God in transforming the broken world into a glorious home for God and for humans to live in peace.



## CHAPTER ONE

# A DIFFERENT SORT OF GOD

The post-modern world has set itself against any kind of religion and theology. It defines religion as a cage that limits a human's perception of the world and everything in it. The present world claims to have progressed because of its discontinuity with religion and because of its scientific achievements and knowledge. Any talk about a god or religion is simply set aside because it seems to be so ancient and outdated. Any theology and religion are simply putting humans in some kind of bondage that enslaves their imagination, knowledge, and power. As a result of enlightenment, everything – science, politics, philosophy, arts, education, sociology, etc. – began to untie with religion.

The world is divided into, at least, two categories of people: religious and secular.<sup>1</sup> While the religious adhere to the faith and practice of their particular religious traditions, the secularists strive to get rid of the religion for the sake of freedom of thought, life, and society. Our culture has its roots at least in two philosophical schools that emerged in

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1 By the word secular, throughout this book, I do not mean the Indian idea of secularism which refers to tolerance towards all religions. I refer to the popular definition of it which is the opposite of religion. Secularity is something that is not connected with religious or spiritual matters and is not bound by any religious rule.

different times but shared similar worldviews. They are Epicureanism of 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and the enlightenment of the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although both of these belong to the Western world, they have crept into almost all parts of the world because of the influence of western thoughts and globalization. Both of them have contributed in some or another way to the building of a secular culture of today that always seeks freedom from religion.

If we are part of such a world where religion is going to be extinct and outdated, how do we claim that there is a God and following Him makes sense? Let me put it in other words, who is God and why He matters? How do we validate our faith? How does God, Jesus, Bible, and Christianity make sense in this world that is seeking after scientific and technological progression? Is the Bible valid because of its connection with science and history? Otherwise, will you simply say, “You must have faith. You must believe that the Bible is true. You must not listen to the critics of religion. If you have faith and experience, then that is enough to sustain yourself in this world”?

Here, I am not denying the contribution of enlightenment to our society. It is because of that renaissance and learning, we began to think and rethink our faith and practices. It has helped to get rid of many socio-ethical evils that crept into the society and the Church. But I’m against that extremism of the ideology of the postmodern world – atheism and scepticism. I do not even support the popular Christian standpoint – conservatist and fundamentalist evangelical Christianity that has shut its doors against any kind of questions and criticism. Such Christianity is dangerous because it becomes lost in some kind of otherworldliness and blind faith without any attempt to hear the world.

Let us not trade one for the sake of the other – our theology and faith for the sake of postmodernist worldview nor the questions and criticisms for the sake of our fundamentalist faith. We need to have a balanced standpoint that respects both our faith as well as the progress of science and society. Between these extremist approaches, let’s try to make sense of the Bible and its claims about who God is. Let us put our Bible into its ancient settings and understand who this God is and why He matters even today. Let us also look at how *different* is this God both in ancient times and how this message comes alive for today’s world too – both for the Church and for society.

### 1.1 A REVIEW OF THE ANCIENT WEST ASIAN RELIGIONS

The world in which the biblical religion took its form was Ancient West Asia (you can also call it Ancient Near East or in modern terms, Middle East). If you look into an ancient world map, this region spreads from ancient Egypt in the lower west to Mesopotamia in the East (from Egypt to Iran of the modern map). This region encompasses two major civilizations in world history – Egypt and Mesopotamia. Despite the tensions, crises, and conflicts, the Ancient West Asians shared many common features in terms of their social structures, religion, and worldview. The biblical religion or the faith of Israel was shaped within this time and space. It is a huge task to discuss the philosophy, religion, and worldview of Ancient West Asia. For now, we just take a brief survey of some features of the religion of the ancient people. In other words, let us discuss something about pagan religious worldview.

First of all, we need to understand that for the ancient peoples, all the reality transcends the events that happen before their eyes. There is something much more than the modern concept of naturalism. They understood that what happens in the world is a part of a greater reality that transcends worldly events. This is to say, there is something much more happening beyond the earthly realm and the events on earth stand as a glimpse of that greater and deeper reality. Therefore, to interpret and perceive the things that are happening in the world, or to simply say, to understand the mechanism behind the natural world, they conceived tales about gods and their world. These tales are popularly known as *myths*. We, the modernists, simply define a myth as something false and untrue. But the function of a myth or mythology is not to present some lies and blunders but rather to help the people to understand the purpose of what's happening here and now. Mythology, therefore, functions as a method to understand reality based on what gods have done. In simple words, ancient mythology was just like the science of today which helped people to explain the reason and purpose behind things. In this sense, what we call mythology today was a deep reality for the ancients.

Almost all of the ancient mythologies speak of theogony and cosmogony – the origin of god(s) and the cosmos. There is a fundamental concept that lies in every mythology according to which there is a primordial reality that supersedes gods and the world. All gods have origin and birth and there is a presumption that there is a realm that

is pre-existent to gods. This is to say the origin of gods and the world is subjected to some higher realm which is the primordial womb. Therefore, the ancient mythologies spoke of the birth of gods in a prehistoric period.

This gives another understanding that no deity is all-powerful and sovereign within himself/herself as they themselves are subjected to a kind of 'fate' that limits their powers and functions. Even the cosmogony shows that the creation of the world is not a single act at once rather it has several roots and purposes. This doesn't mean that the gods do not have powers and autonomous functions. Yes, they exist. But there is no concept of one all-powerful and all sufficient god who is not subjected to any higher power than himself. Since the existence of gods and cosmos are defined by the same parameters, the deities cannot exercise their power beyond the pre-set parameters.

Mythologies also spoke about diversity within the divine world. Deities themselves are subjected to fate and they cannot define their role on their terms. Gods had families and they created the world for themselves. These gods give birth to children who later grow, mature, and become gods and goddesses. They also age and die. They build cities and civilizations. They also engage in works for their survival. On the other hand, some deities are evil in nature. There are clashes and conflicts between gods themselves which even lead to destroying one another. There is also an idea that these gods try to protect themselves and their families from other *angry* deities. According to some mythologies, the world came into existence as a result of cosmic battles between gods. It seems so strange to us, but this is what the ancients understood about their gods and their world.

Concerning the religion and sociology of the ancients, they considered themselves as slave labourers to their gods. They believed that these gods who build cities and engage in different occupations for their food and sustenance have grown tired after a long period of time. In other words, these gods require food, drink, clothing and shelter just as humans do. Therefore, gods created human beings as slave labours as they grew tired of growing their own food and satisfying their own needs. Human beings could do this by the means of religion and cult (rituals, sacrifices, etc.).

People of the ancient world also understood that gods dwell along with the people in the sacred space. Sacred space is a region in the world

where gods and humans meet each other. This is the place where the human world intersects with the divine world. Most of the time, the mountains or high places are considered as dwelling places of gods. They built the temples and by the means of temple rituals, they believed, they could satisfy the needs of their gods. In turn, gods were willing to help human beings in the time of their needs. They also sought the well-being, order and stability among human beings which keep them happy. However, when the deities sought the welfare of human beings, it was not out of their prime attention to the human world but because they wanted their needs to be satisfied. They sought a stable society not because they are interested in the matters of justice and righteousness but because a stable society can satisfy their needs better. Deities are responsible to provide security and protection to human beings because they are needy and they depend on human beings for their survival. Such interdependence between gods and humans can be termed as *Great Symbiosis*.

Although gods and human beings are understood as interdependent beings, often humans are vulnerable to the capricious gods and forces. They always live in the shadow of gods and forces whose moods change suddenly. They are also vulnerable to attacks by the evil gods who are never interested in the welfare of human beings. Sometimes, the good gods – who favour humans – are also subjected to evil. Evil, therefore, exists as an autonomous reality that exists alongside god(s) from which even gods cannot escape. Humans tire themselves in satisfying these angry gods time and again to keep their sustenance. Humans are often unsure of the reasons why they are subjected to unpredictable forces and powers in the world. The suffering of human beings is understood, primarily, as a result of one's ritual offence – a failure in satisfying the needs of gods. Humans beings, therefore, are treated as objects of pleasure rather than a dignified society.

Salvation for humans, therefore, is to escape from these gods. Most of the time, gods are not seriously concerned about the salvation of humans because they are subjected to fate. Salvation must be attained by humans by their efforts. To be saved is to escape from this world into a better world.

Above all these, the ancient conception of the world is a kind of *amoral* – not immoral but amoral which means morally neutral. The tales about the divine world are themselves amoral. There is no absolute

rule and practice of morality. Gods themselves fight with each other, they engage in battles, adultery, polygamy and polyandry. They are subjected to sin, punishment and sorrow. The human world, therefore, simply a replica of that kind of amoral universe. There are laws and instructions for morality and ethics. But nothing is absolute. There is no absolute standard of morality and ethics.

There is much to say about the worldview of the peoples of the ancient world. But this is enough for us to understand how differently the Israelites understood their God and how it matters for us today as we are enjoying the legacy of the religion of ancient Israel.

### **1.2 PLACING ISRAELITE RELIGION WITHIN ITS WORLD**

Against such a backdrop of ancient worldview, the way ancient Israel conceived her God is so revolutionary and a radical discontinuity with the rest of the world. The Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, serves as a window to understanding Yahweh, the God of Israel.

First of all, we need to understand that when Israelites spoke of one God, it wasn't like another kind of belief that existed in the ancient world. This is to say that Israelites understood their God in a way that no one in the ancient world would have expected. This God, according to them, does not have a theogony – a myth about His origin. This God is not subjected to anything pre-existent realm that gives birth to gods and cosmos. This God has not born from a primordial womb and He does not have a life story of growth, maturity and succession. This God does not have any spouse. He does not age, He is not limited in time, space and matter, and He does never have any basic needs for His survival and sustenance. He did not create the world for the satisfaction of His needs nor does He create humans to be His slave labourers. This is for the first time in history, we meet such a God. The biblical understanding of God is not ought to be left behind as a result of the evolutionary development of the human religion. The religion of Israel is a revolution against all sorts of understanding about gods and the world.

The Hebrew Bible does not only speak of its God in exaggerated terms but also elevates the creation, existence and purpose of humankind to a different level. Humans, according to the Hebrew Bible, are not slave labourers who are created to satisfy the needs of their creator rather they are created to rule alongside Him. This is a sort of God who seeks



for human good and does everything with humans as the centre of his purposes and actions. The purpose of their creation is to be His partners.

The biblical understanding of God is also an ethical monotheism which means since God is one, His ethical standards are absolute and perfect. Evil is not an autonomous force that exists alongside God. Although there is evil and suffering in the world, it is neither co-eternal nor co-equal to God because evil in itself is an inferior force to God. Unlike the dualistic ideas that prevail in today's religion – an idea that good and evil are the supreme cosmic powers to which everything is subject – ancient Israel did not have this concept because good and evil are not the pre-existent forces to God. Therefore, this God does not have any rival or equal to His power and authority. He does not create what is evil nor is subjected to evil. It is human beings who have all the freedom to rebel against the power of God.

Freedom of this God defines freedom among human beings. He is attentive to the cries of the people oppressed by the forces that disturb the freedom of His creatures. This God makes a covenant with people. He partners with human beings and works with them and through them. Human beings are not vulnerable beings to the unpredictable mood swings of this God. It is their choices and actions that make them subjected to God's anger. Therefore, the relationship between Yahweh and humankind is a relationship of covenant – agreement and partnership. Making this God happy means to follow His instructions and by which the world would become a better place for both God and humans to dwell together. This is the theme which we will be discussing throughout the rest of the sections.

### 1.3 NO TO OTHER GODS

You may wonder to see that this God, in the Bible, strictly prohibits the worship of any other gods besides Him. He is portrayed as a jealous God who never encourages His people to go after other gods. Following other gods bring serious consequences throughout the Bible. Why? Why is this God so *conservative* and *jealous*? Well, the answer would be simple: 'they will become like what they worship.' If you look into the practices of the pagan religion, the worship and cults were associated with many kinds of evil deeds. There are child-sacrifices, temple prostitution, self-injuring, celebrations filled with shameless and abhorring acts and so on.

In the ancient world, having faith in some god did not refer to the belief in their existence. Nor is meant to mere prayer and sacrifice to those gods. To be precise, for the ancients, the existence of something is not defined in terms of space and matter but in the terms of function and purpose. Worshipping a god/goddess is to be associated with all the practices that are part of honouring such and such gods and goddesses. Moreover, following different gods dilute the strictness of morality and ethics. Yahweh, the God of Israel, has the absolute forms of ethical codes which keep the society and the world ordered and stable. Violation of His instructions simply means to be devoid of the purpose of human life.

It is to be noted that the relationship between God and Israel was a relationship of covenant/partnership. The covenant is more like a marital commitment where both the partners are to be loyal to one another. Therefore, to worship Yahweh alone meant to be loyal to His covenant. Being loyal to Him is to carry out His vocation and His purposes in the world. Worshipping Yahweh is not about satisfying His needs rather it is to live out the life that is loyal to His covenant. We would explore in the coming chapters how partnering with this God could make the world a better place.

#### **1.4 FREEDOM FROM THE CAGE**

As seen earlier, the postmodern world is set against the idea of God or religion. Let us just briefly look at the reasons that have caused the modern world to take such a radical step. I have stated earlier that the postmodern world makes its standpoint on two ideologies that are similar yet emerged at different times: Epicureanism and renaissance/enlightenment. Let us just briefly look at their origin.

Epicureanism was a school of Greek philosophy that was brought up in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by a man named Epicurus. This philosophy was a reaction against the Greek religion and mythology according to which humans are simply vulnerable to the capricious gods whose actions affect a lot to humankind. Every time something wrong happens in the world, the people understand it as an expression of some angry god. Therefore, the people are forced to engage in religion and cult to satisfy these deities which, otherwise, could cause a great loss to them. Epicureanism reacted against such mythology and tried to rescue people from such *a cage of religion*. It stated that if at all gods exist, they exist in another world

and human beings are not supposed to enslave themselves in satisfying these gods. Instead, they can enjoy their life in freedom, happiness and satisfying their own desires.

Enlightenment/Renaissance of the modern times was also a similar reaction against the religion and *mythology* of the Church in the West. During the middle ages, the way how the church presented God is a way similar to that of paganism. The people of the church were loaded with many kinds of rituals, odd practices and financial burdens which were very strange to early Christianity. There were tickets to heaven sold by the church. Guilty people were charged with a high amount of penance. Moreover, the church controlled the thoughts and perceptions of the people. But with the rise of revolutionary innovations and discoveries, people came to a conclusion that they needed freedom from religion because it controlled their thoughts, science, politics, education and everything. Therefore, the Renaissance was a reaction against the Church in Medieval centuries, not against the biblical Christianity which has long been forgotten.

The problem with the postmodern society is that it went to the extreme of denying any kind of religion with a preoccupied thought that religion enslaves people. The postmodern world simply presumes that religion is a cage from which humans must save themselves so that they can enjoy their lives. Conservative church, on the other hand, has simply shut its doors, satisfied with its pietistic faith and teaching its people about “*how to get into heaven after you die*” and limiting Gospel to Christ who is simply a *personal saviour*.

Both of these extremes have offered the wrong solutions for the real problem. While postmodernism avoided religion at all, the conservative church has avoided encouraging a serious biblical theology at all because when a serious study is encouraged the Church needs to come out of its traditional doctrines. Both of these extremes never offer a solution for the real crisis in the world. The world would never become a better place if the postmodern ideology of freedom, reasoning and entertainment rule this world. The world would never become a better place as long as the Church preaches about *personal salvation to get into heaven by escaping from this world and its questions*.

In the following pages, we will survey different themes in the Scriptures and how they build up as a narrative and offer a solution for the world today and serve as an antidote to the Church’s conservatism.



## CHAPTER TWO

# IN SEARCH OF A PARTNER

Generally, every Christian is familiar with the opening pages of the Bible. If I ask you, “How does the Bible begin?” you might quickly answer, “Ah, it’s all about the stories about God creating the good world, and a man and woman being put in a beautiful garden where they were put to a moral test. Eventually, they failed in that moral test and all of a sudden God kicked them out of that beautiful garden, never allowing them to return. Later, this couple had two sons, but sadly, the younger one was killed by his elder brother. Following it, the whole new civilizations and peoples emerged but God was not so happy with them because of their actions and He suddenly blots them out by causing a great-great flood but spared a man and his family because they listened to God’s command to build a life-boat and so on.” Yes, of course, you are very familiar with the opening of the Bible. But there is something more to be explored through these narratives.

It is not as easy as told to introduce the themes and pictures that are found in the opening pages of the Bible. Genesis 1-11 vividly narrates different incidents that are woven together as a single narrative that has some deeper message within itself. Often these chapters are read in bits and pieces, as individual and independent stories, that do not fit one

unified narrative. The way Genesis 1-11 had been written, serves not as an old-fashioned retelling of some legendary stories, but as an introduction to the narrative and message of the whole Bible. These opening chapters of the Bible are not meant to know about the beginnings by speculating some science and history in it. It's about heaven and earth being one and it narrates how they had been separated. When you read it carefully, you can find these narratives echoing throughout the Scriptures again and again. You can also find them happening just before your own eyes.

## **2.1 WHEN HEAVEN AND EARTH WERE ONE**

There is something that happens too often with the first chapters of Genesis that drives us away from the foundational message, which is expressed through different imageries that are woven together. It is reading Genesis with the modern lens of science and history. Ever since humans have begun scientific and rational researches regarding the origin of the cosmos and the evolution of the human race on the earth, Genesis has become part of higher criticisms that simply limited it to a category of ancient mythology. Critics view it as a mere ancient fashion of telling about the origins of the world. We can, on the other hand, find another strange category of people – conservative fundamentalist Christians – who keep on doing home-works to prove that the first chapters of Genesis are really ‘science and history’ against all the claims of the critics. In their fights to defend their views, they all have gone too far from the message of the opening chapters of the Bible, which serve as a setting to understand the overall biblical narrative. Let's leave the words and arguments of those ‘defenders’ and begin to hear how the biblical authors are communicating to us a radically different message through their ancient worldviews.

The creation account of the Bible is the ancient way of telling of the origins. It is not interested in the questions that we have today. It does not deal with questions like how all this came into existence instead it is more concerned about the function and purpose of the world. What the conservative Christians and the liberals try to search on the first page of Genesis is about the process of the origin of the world – to reconcile scientific researches and *their* claims whether or not Bible is scientifically authentic. But the ancient cosmologies are more interested in understanding the function of the creation so that they can relate to it and to their God within that purpose. The description is like that of

building a temple in which God comes to take rest – something like settling in a house after finishing the process of building. The creation story is like God building His Kingdom and enthroning over it. Therefore the biblical creation story, just like any other ancient cosmology, is more interested in the theological message, not in our modern questions about the origin that are never interested in learning the purpose.

The Bible opens with a beautiful picture of God ordering and furnishing the cosmos – the heavens and the earth. The creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 vividly portray the power, majesty and purposes of God in creating the world, rather than giving a ‘scientific’ account about the origins of the world. Genesis 1:1 begins with an introductory statement, “In the beginning when God began to create the heavens<sup>1</sup> (skies) and the earth (land),” which is further explained through the following verses. The use of the words heaven and earth together is one of the beautiful styles of the Hebrew language to put two contrasting realities together to express perfection and completion. In other words, the Bible opens with the theme of God preparing a perfection – the togetherness of heaven and earth. Genesis 1:2 continues that the earth was *wild and waste* – void, desolate, barren, useless, uninhabitable and purposeless. For the ancient people, nothingness means something that is unassigned and void of purpose. It is an image of darkness and chaos where there is nothing that could be utilized. And over these deep waters and in such darkness, we see the Spirit of God moving over it again and again.

God’s active presence begins to order the world to make it inhabitable and useful. In the first three days, God prepares different habitable places and in the next three consecutive days God fills them up. This is to say, God orders the disordered world by creating different spaces of function – light, sky, seas and the dry land – and then fills these spaces with heavenly bodies, birds, and sea and land creatures. God made it all *good* and *very good*.

Now let’s come to the creation and purpose of humans in the new world that is ordered and furnished by God. Genesis 1 and 2 use different words to explain it. According to Genesis 1:26, God created human beings in His image and likeness. They are created so to rule over the creation of God. Humans are supposed to be the *stewards of creation*. The purpose of

1 The plurality here is a plurality of extension which is an art in the Hebrew language to express the vastness, greatness and immensity of something. To say heavens is to speak about all that is in heaven.

humans, therefore, is to have dominion over the world. They are created as *the crown of the creation* in the image and likeness of God.

If you note the *image of God* here, it sounds much like images of gods in the pagan temples. For the ancient peoples, even to some in the present, the images/idols in the temples are not gods themselves rather they are the expressions of their deities in a concrete form. The service offered to these idols directly affect the gods whose images they bear. In such a language, humans are the images of the Creator God in the world. Let us consider the cosmos as the Temple of God and in this cosmos, the humans, as bearers of the image of their creator, demonstrate the presence of God to the other creatures and the fellow humans. Don't get it wrong. Humans are not gods themselves but they are the ones who demonstrate the presence of God by their lifestyle.

Israelites emphasized the transcendence of their God by making the statements like He is completely *other* from the created order. They disagreed with the view that God could be known through the molten images. Alongside the criticism of representation of God with any type of idols, the Hebrew Bible makes radically a counter-statement to all its contemporary religious traditions. God forbids to make any kind of images to represent Him because *He has already made His images*. If at all God could be expressed through the creatures, it is only through *human beings*. "God is known peculiarly through this creature who exists in the realm of free history, where power is received, decisions are made and commitments are honoured. God is not imaged in anything fixed but in the freedom of human persons to be faithful and gracious."<sup>2</sup>

In the ancient world, kings were often considered images of god(s) to show that they act with divine authority. In this sense, the purpose of humans as image-bearers is to rule and have dominion. They exercise power and responsibility just as God exercises His power over all the creation. It is not at all about the tyrannical exercise of power rather it is the power that comes with careful guardianship. This is to say, humans represent the Kingdom of God in their relation to the cosmos. They are supposed to multiply and fill the earth with the presence of God's Kingdom on earth. Let's ponder on this: in and through humans – the earthly creatures bearing the image of God – heaven and earth come

2       Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Series, edited by James Luther Mays (Atlanta: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 32.



together. God's light and life manifest on the earth. God's Kingdom becomes a reality in the world.

Thinking a little further, the creation story of Genesis defines humankind's relationship with the rest of the creation not only in terms of dominion but also in terms of economics. The creation of God is a demonstration of God's distributive justice. In His generosity, God has made every resource available to every single human being on the planet. It also implies that if everything is the creation of God, then human beings have no right to claim complete ownership of the resources that are available in nature to the extreme of depriving the poor and powerless of their right to enjoy the resources of the creation. The creation story demands a sustainable economic system that gives everyone the right to utilize the resources. In other words, everyone's interests and sustainability must be valued. It is not that the corporates withhold a bunch of the resources leaving the rest of the society to live in their mercy. God's distributive justice also marks boundaries between the humans and the rest of the creation. Human beings, out of their selfish interest, are not supposed to ruin the sustainability of the ecological systems. Humankind, bearing the image of God, must guard the distributive justice of God as they have dominion over the creation.

After ordering the world and placing the humans as rulers over it, God rests on the Seventh-day – the day that has no sunset in the story. Wait, what does this rest mean? The language of rest here denotes the sense of *royal rest*. It is like a king enthroning over his kingdom after ordering and refurbishing it. The world in Genesis 1:2 was a world of complete disorder and vanity. God works on it for six consecutive days in recreating an ordered world and appointing rulers over it. After finishing His renovation, the world becomes fit to be ruled by God. Now, on the seventh day, God rests – He enthrones over it. He is at ease with the well-being of the creation that is being ruled by Him. This day, unlike the other six days, has no end.

In the ancient world, the concept of divine rest was a very prominent theme. The rest of god(s) is achieved in the temple after ordering and establishing something. The divine rest, according to the ancient world, is not only about *the discontinuity* of any further work of establishing order but also about *continuity* and *return to the temple* to maintain an ordered, perfect and established world. If this is the understanding of the divine

rest in the ancient worldview, then the rest of God in Genesis shows that the language of the creation narrative is similar to that of temple-building and temple-dedication where the cosmos is the sacred space (see Isa. 66:1) which God orders, perfects, establishes and furnishes. Humans serve as the image of God and as His priests in this sacred space. Therefore, God finds His rest in this cosmic temple where He comes to dwell and to maintain the created order.<sup>3</sup>

Genesis 2 takes a different tone in demonstrating the identity and purpose of humans in the world. According to the account of Genesis 2:4ff, God creates a man from the dust of the ground to cultivate the land. God plants a beautiful garden and places the man in it. Then God creates different land creatures and birds from the ground and brings them to man. But none of these become a partner for the man other than a woman who was created from the rib of man. The woman was created as *'ezer* (helper). It is to be noted that just as the man-like woman has become the partner to the man, God has created humans in His image and likeness so that we can become His partners.

According to Genesis 2, humans are created from the dust just as any other thing in the creation – trees, birds and animals. But what makes human different is *the breath of God*. God made the humans from dust but gave His life-giving breath to them which separated them from the rest of the creation. But what kind of difference does it make for humans to have the breath of God? Let's note it again, in humans the earth and heaven become one. The flesh is made of dust and it is empowered by the life of God which we call as spirit. It is not about the perishable body and the immortal soul/spirit but a psychophysical unity of divine and earthly elements. Again, the language of Genesis 1 echoes here: humans, as the creation of God, carry the Presence of God within themselves which fills the earth with the immeasurable life of God. By sharing in the life of God, the humans are supposed to carry out their purpose of guarding the land that was given to them. God's glory (the heaviness of God's presence or the intensity of the expression of God) was supposed to fill all the earth as humans multiply and spread throughout the land.

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3 For detailed understanding, look John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Illinois: IVP Academic, 2009).

Humans are indeed weak creatures when compared to the rest of God's creation. They are mere earthlings who stand in awe of the majestic power of the Lord God over all of His creation. They stand as vulnerable beings to the forces of the nature. They are also weaker than the beasts of the land. Yet, God chose these weak and powerless creatures to appoint them over the rest of His creation to rule it. God's reign on earth and all of the creation is demonstrated through humanity. It is not the powerful beasts that rule the earth but the insignificant human beings through whom God is pleased to express Himself.

By all these images, we have explored how humans play a vital role in interlocking the presence of two different realms – heaven and the earth. Humans, according to Genesis, are not presented as helpless victims exposed to the blind forces of nature, nor they are the puppets and servants of unreliable gods because this is the way how the contemporary Ancient West Asian texts portrayed humanity. According to them, their gods are never concerned about humankind because they are busy saving themselves from other evil gods. In such a setting, Genesis makes a revolutionary claim in the ancient world that humans, indeed, have a purpose because the One who created them is a different sort of God. The purpose of humanity, therefore, is to partner with God in expressing His life and His dominion in the cosmos not to act as puppets of God's drama. They are creatures with moral freedom. But as you continue to read, you see how humans failed to be faithful to this purpose and how they, again and again, stepped out of their *creatureliness* and lost the *glory* of God.

## 2.2 LIFE AND WISDOM

We read in Genesis 2:8-9, God placed the man he created in the Garden that was in Eden. God filled it with every kind of tree that is edible and delightful. At the same time, He also placed two different trees in the middle of the garden. Those are named as the 'Tree of Life' and the 'Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.' In 2:16-17, God has commanded the man that he could eat from any tree except the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil. If he eats from it, he shall die. It's a test but not merely a moral test. It is a choice given to humans. Well, what's that about?

We can consider the Garden of Eden as a Temple where God and humans live together. Eden is also the centre of life in the narrative: it is the fertile land and gives birth to *the water of life* that flows through the

Garden and goes outside of it, dividing up into four tributaries, to bring life to the rest of the earth. The term Eden also means *delight* and *pleasure*. No wonder the same word has become synonymous with ‘paradise.’ In other words, it is a place where heaven and the earth meet together. At the centre of this temple, the presence of God is so intense which is described with the Tree of Life. Eating this fruit leads to ‘eternal life’ (Gen. 3:22). If we notice the wordplay in Genesis 1-3, we notice that humans and trees are defined in the same words – being fruitful, life-generating and bearing seed.

The Tree of Life here does not have any magical power rather it radiates God’s own life because God is the source of all life. This is to say, humans are free to eat it and share in the life of God. The essence here is about more than becoming immortals. It is about expressing God’s own life on the earth. Humans have the freedom to be partners with God by sharing His own transforming life. However, there is also another tree that tests their faith – the Tree of Wisdom. Knowing good and evil refers to moral autonomy. This tree too appears delightful to the eyes just like any other tree in the garden but it’s a false tree of life from which humans are told not to eat.

Humans are forbidden to eat from this Tree of Wisdom. This is because God intended humans to share in His life and rely on God’s definition of good and evil ‘to rule over the earth.’ This doesn’t mean God is intending humans to be like mere puppets, following His instructions alone. That’s not the thing here. God gave humans *His image* and *His breath*, not to be puppets but to be creators themselves. They could create the world as they like. But it is simply about depending on God’s definition of good and evil.

To be right, God has hidden something from them: it is they would become like *divine beings* if they know good and evil (see Gen. 3:22). Therefore, this is a matter of trust. It is whether humans would consider God as *reliable*, *trustworthy* and *true* even if they were not revealed to all the facts that God knows. They are supposed to express their faith despite the things that are not made known to them. As long as humans rely on God’s wisdom and do not choose to define good and evil on their own, they express the life of God on the earth. The day they choose to depend on their own wisdom i.e., the day they eat from the *false tree of life*, they will be cut off from the life-giving power of God.

This is a test – it is a choice between life and wisdom. Here in the narrative, it is God who defines good and evil (Gen. 1:31; 2:18). If humans choose to rely on God's definition of good and evil, they could create the world that radiates God's own life in and through them. They could use the authority of God (image of God) to rule the world by partnering and cooperating with Him. The Kingdom of God could be expressed through them as they continue to exhibit God's own creative power and wisdom.

But there is also an alternative life before them. They can push God out of the scene and choose to do what is good in their own eyes. They can gain wisdom and use God-given authority to recreate the world as they like. Well, that sounds good, but it breaks humans from life-support. Humans can no longer partner with God in ruling the world. While immortality is the gift of God, death is the consequence of humans' own definition of good and evil. Humans can no longer remain as agents of God's own life and power but simply become agents of sin and death. In simple words, the *life* that the Tree of Wisdom offers is a kind of life that would finally lead them to death as humans set up their standards of living.

### 2.3 THIRST FOR FOOLISH WISDOM

The beautiful narrative of God creating an ordered world and entrusting it to His partners – the human beings – continue smoothly until a mysterious creature enters into paradise with a cunning idea. We are introduced to a crafty creature in Genesis 3 which is a *talking serpent*. We know the story: it spoke to the humans with flattering words, enticing them to eat the fruit that God commanded not to eat. When humans listened and obeyed the Serpent's words, they were cursed by God and kicked out of the garden. This is not an individual story that should be read independently from the overall picture that is being introduced to us in the Book of Genesis. Let us not be too quick to identify the serpent with Satan because it, not the picture we get here and the authors do not call us to speculate the identity of this creature even if we can make a systematic construction by bringing together different passages of the Bible (sometimes even out of their context and purpose). But we are called to listen to the story and look at the narrative as it is. We can see how this crafty – skilled and wise – creature among all the animals became the most cursed among all the beasts of the land.

Well, now let's look at the narrative a bit closer. The serpent seduced the humans with these words: "Surely you won't die if you eat from the tree that God has commanded not to eat. *God knows* that when you eat this fruit, you will *become gods* for your eyes will be opened and you can have an autonomous life." The Serpent was right when it said that they come to know the good and evil if they eat the fruit of this tree – they can become like God(s). If you note its words, it said *God knows* what happens when they eat the fruit. They can have an autonomous life. They can decide what is good and evil and act according to what is good in their own eyes. They would have independence from their Creator in ruling and controlling the world. It is like an adult person becoming free from his/her parents in making decisions and depending on their support. Similarly, the Serpent offers a kind of independence from God.

The Serpent here, therefore, did not act as a deceiver. Yes, it was a deceiver, as Paul said it, but not in the sense we usually think of it. If you notice the words of the serpent, they are projecting a different god than the One whom the humans know. The words of God in Genesis 2:16-17 present Him as a God of *freedom* and *blessing*. God gave them the freedom to eat from any tree except for one. But the Serpent reversed the words of God presenting Him as a god of *prohibition* and *restriction*.<sup>4</sup> It began with the question that asked whether God restricted and prohibited them from eating any fruit. In the following words, it went on showing how God has withheld some sense from humans. Humans are invited to judge the character of God. They were directed to step beyond their creatureliness.

Serpent manipulated humans to feel that they need independence from a god who is prohibiting them to enjoy their life in fullness. The intention here is to show that God is not reliable, trustworthy and true. We can word the Serpent's intentions like this: "Well, you see, God is not as reliable as you think. He is a tyrant. He is acting as if He is so good. He shows himself to you as he is desiring your well-being. That's not true at all. He is hiding something from you. He wants you to be so limited in your power and dominion." If they keep on trusting God, they ruin their lives. If they rely on God's definition of life, they end up being puppets, though this was not the thing that God intended. In this sense, the serpent is the deceiver, not in the sense of telling lies.

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4        Iain Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion: What the Old Testament Really Says and Why it Matters* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014), 113.

When the humans believed the words of the Serpent, what they did was not merely rebellion against God. It was not merely disobedience to God's command. They desired to become gods themselves. They wanted to push God out of the scene in rejecting the way they are supposed to partner with Him. They desired independence, complete control and autonomous life. But this the independence from God, from the real source of Life! They choose the wisdom over the life that God has freely offered them. They inhaled the poisonous breath of the crafty creature. They welcomed the Serpent's thoughts into them. Let me say it in another way, the humans – the creatures who are supposed to rule over the entire creation – are now obeying a beast – a poisonous being that destroys the life that God has offered to humans. Therefore, what humans did here was not simply a matter of disobedience rather a matter of their ultimate choice of knowing good and evil. It is going farther enough to distrust in God's design of life.

The desire of humans here is to become gods. Instead of reflecting the image of God who created them, they wanted to create their images in the world. This is absolutely idolatry – desiring for the gods other than the Creator. When the Serpent said that they can become like gods, it meant that they can become truly autonomous in their lives at the same time not losing the immortality that they were offered in the garden. Indeed, they can become like gods because it is God alone who has both of these attributes within Himself – the immortal Life and the Wisdom. What humans desired was to step beyond their creatureliness. They were intended to be humans but now they want to step to a higher position – to the position of God Himself. I repeat it, they thought that they would be completely independent when they come to decide good and evil on their terms.

The Serpent gave its poisonous thoughts and breathed into humans and the humans chose to become like what they had heard from it. Their eyes were opened and realized that they were naked. They began to feel shameful and started to cover themselves up. Until now it was a story of freedom, blessing, trust and loyalty. Now the story has turned upside down into a story of restrictions, prohibitions, distrust and legal judgements. Their choices affected not only their state of being but also their relationships with each other. The humans who are supposed to rule the creation now became rulers of their kind. It led to broken relationships.

Note the words God said to the woman – “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain, you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16). Often it is interpreted as labour pains of a woman while giving birth to a child. But the terminology here is not about that. We can understand it in the sense of the social setting of the families. The pain is not simply the pain of childbirth but it's the painful circumstances into which a woman brings her child into the world.<sup>5</sup> The pain of the woman must be seen in connection to the man's toil (same word as used for the woman) in the field. In response to the man's toil, the earth produces thorns and thistles – an opposite picture of the agricultural pattern in the Eden. And now, into such painful circumstances, the woman brings forth the children into the world. The suffering, therefore, is not natural with humanity.

The humans who are supposed to rule over the created order now became rulers over themselves. Human relationships have ruined to a ground level. The woman herself also becomes a threat to the proper relationship with her husband. She *desires* for her husband and he shall *rule* over her (Gen. 3:16). We can derive the meaning of these words from Genesis 4:7 where we find the same words spoken to Cain concerning sin. Sin is spoken to have a desire over Cain and this desire is destructive. It is portrayed as a wild beast waiting to catch and devour its prey. Therefore, having this meaning for the word *desire* – waiting to attack the victim – the woman's desire refers to control, even to consume, her husband.<sup>6</sup> The effect of this act is the dominion of man over the woman. In fact, according to the storyline, the woman was not subordinate rather an equal partner and helper to the man in ruling over the creation. Now they both consider each other as no more than any other creature and their relationship of trust and mutual dependence has turned into a kind of domination and exploitation. As we look into the result of humanity's choice the earth is also no longer supporting its rulers. Humans are created from dust and to the dust, they shall return.

The whole narrative here is not simply meant to help the readers to speculate about the origins of sin and evil in the world. The Hebrew Bible is not interested in speaking about the origin of evil and suffering. Moreover, the creation narrative is not meant to know about how and when the universe has emerged rather it meant to speak about the purpose

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5 Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 117.

6 Provan, *Seriously Dangerous Religion*, 118.



of the world. The theories about the origin of the world, evil and suffering are strange to the ancient world. Therefore, let us not belittle the message of Genesis 1-3 to a mere story about how and when the world came into existence. The story in Genesis 3 is not simply a story about *fall* and not even about the so-called *Original Sin*. It was not meant to say that since and because Adam had sinned, all are incapable of doing good and all are born sinners. Evil, in itself, is not co-eternal to God nor even an equal rival to God. "...Israelite religion did not conceive of sin as caused by an independent evil power that exists out there in the universe and is defying the will of God. Instead evil comes about as a result of the clash of the will of God and the will of humans who happen to have the freedom to rebel."<sup>7</sup>

A better way of understanding the story could be viewing it as a story of how God wants humans to bear His image and represent His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. It is a story of God's pleasing to partner with humans and interlock both heaven and earth through them. Sadly, human beings desire independence and do not consider God as faithful and reliable enough as they continue to see God as someone who restricts and prohibits them from having complete freedom, though this is not what the character of God is. It is not that humans are not capable of doing good rather it is that humans do not want to partner with God.

Let's come back to the words of Serpent. It said that humans can become gods when their eyes are opened. It pointed out that moral autonomy or doing what is good in their own eyes can elevate their position as that is equal to God Himself. It is, indeed, right in saying that but it also concealed the truth that they cannot become like the one who created them. It said that God is the one who has complete moral autonomy but also hid the fact that He has chosen good and never inclines to evil. It means God has complete knowledge of good and evil, He has all the freedom and right to execute His actions on His terms but the difference is He only does what is good. He is completely inclined to goodness and evil has no place in Him.

But that could not be the same with humans. When they have moral autonomy – or freedom to act on their own terms – they have the possibility of inclining to evil. They could distort the earth as they rule on their own wisdom and not partnering with God. The result is the world

7 Christine Hayes, "The Hebrew Bible in its Ancient Near Eastern Setting: Biblical Religion in Context," (class lecture, Introduction to the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible), Yale University, New Haven, 2006).

would not remain as good (perfectly ordered) as God created it. Paul put it in his words like this: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Rom. 1:22). In the following words (Rom. 1:26-31) he describes how corrupted humanity has become:

*For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.*

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.*

Now, therefore, if you observe keenly, Serpent also did the same thing that God has done. While God has hidden the fact that the humans can become like divine beings when they have moral autonomy (Gen. 2:16-17 cf. 3:1-3 cf. 3:22), the Serpent has hidden the fact that they cannot become like the God who created them and they cannot be sure that what they do would always be “good” (when I say *good*, I refer to God’s creative act in Genesis 1-2 where God’s actions bring an order, life and perfection). Sadly, in the narrative, human beings considered God as unreliable as He has hidden something from them and regarded the Serpent as a reliable *truth-teller* and *revealer* which itself has hidden the sad outcome of their actions.

Let us get it right: when God does not reveal something to humans, it does not refer to him as some kind of a jealous God who keeps his holy secrets for himself. It is not even that he is a sort of a tyrant god who imposes his restrictions and prohibitions on his creatures. It’s all about trust – it is to say that God is trustworthy as far as He revealed His intentions. Indeed, human life is complicated; there are mysteries and incomprehensible realities. It is not that humans have to ignore all of them and move upon them. It’s not at all *ignorance* rather it’s a matter of trust in God. The narrative exposes how human autonomy could finally lead to death – in the opposite direction of God’s purpose for the world and humanity.

This happens again and again, if we see the upcoming narratives as written cyclically – as something repeating – rather than as a linear narrative. But there's also a promise coming here in Eden. God said that someday the seed of the woman – say, new humanity – would crush the head of the Serpent – defeat its nature that has been inculcated into humans. This is to say that this new humanity would choose to partner with God in ruling the world rather than doing everything on their terms and destroy the creation. As you are reading this, you might have been thinking, “Well, this promised human being is none other than Jesus Christ and that's it.” Yeah, that's right but not so early, there is a long narrative ahead of us that finally leads to Jesus. Let's look at it as we move further but for now, let's continue with the story of the first human beings.

## 2.4 ANOTHER WAY OF LIFE

A great surprise in the narrative is not that humans failed to trust their God in carrying out their vocation as partners of God. Instead, the wonder is that God still allows them to *live*. They deserve death as punishment for what they have done. They proved themselves to be disloyal; they rejected the vocation that is entrusted to them by the Gardener; they crossed their limits and challenged God's trustworthiness in helping them to rule over the earth, and they listened to a *wild beast* that provoked them to rebel against God. What they deserve is death – a complete disconnection from God. Though death is the consequence of their actions, God does not want them to die but allows them to live. But this life would not be the same as the life that they enjoyed in the Garden. Their actions indeed brought sin, evil and suffering into humankind which is the opposite of God's good world.

We see that the man gives a different name to his partner, other than the name that he has given to her previously. He calls her *Eve* (*Chavvah* in Hebrew) which sounds similar to the Hebrew word for a *living* (*Chayyah*). In the ancient world, to name someone is to assign a function. In this sense, Adam assigns a vocation to his wife by naming her Eve and saying that she would be the mother of all the living. Let's note the difference here, when the man (*'ish*) names his partner as a woman (*'isha*), it could mean that he considers her as equal to himself and has the right to partner in his vocation. But now the names Adam and Eve sound differently and the function of *motherhood* is bound up with the new name. “Essentially what has happened is this: the woman is now defined by the man in terms

of only *one* of her original functions in the world. She is no longer defined in terms of her entire vocation, which is to rule over creation alongside the man.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is evident that human autonomy has led society into a system of broken relationships and distrust.

However, let us not belittle *motherhood* to a sort of vocation but also see it as a blessing. God’s blessing of humans to grow and multiply does not cease to function in the setting of unfaithfulness and punishment. The woman continues to carry the blessing as she brings life into the world. We also have looked at the promise that was made to the woman that one day her *seed* would crush the Serpent. At the same time, life carries out its own complexities as the woman brings life into the world, not in the setting of an ordered and perfect life rather into a world that has become vulnerable to suffering and evil. Among all these, let us see God as the one who allows human beings to live despite their state of rebellion.

Let us continue with the narrative. God drives humans out of His Garden for they have failed to carry out His vocation by partnering with Him. They are now exiled from their home out into the land where they have to toil and continue their life that is vulnerable to death. They are not allowed to share in the Garden life but are allowed to live. In Genesis 4, we have the narrative of the beginning of human civilization outside the Garden of Eden. As we move along we could find how humankind is corrupting itself again and again.

We know the story of Cain and Abel. Both of them brought the offering before the Lord but as one was accepted and the other was not, we find the effect of this. Cain was furious – jealous over his brother – and this is the time when God speaks to Cain. We know the words God spoke to Cain where the terminology is so similar to that of the words God spoke to the woman. “Why are you so jealous?” God said, “Be careful; for *sin* is at your door waiting to hunt you. Its *desire* is for you yet you can rule over it” (Gen. 4:7). This is where we find the word *sin* for the first time. The word *sin* (*Khathah*) means to miss the goal or not being up to the mark. It is a general term – not too religious as we see it.

God warns Cain not to yield to the sin that is craving for him. He has to rule and subdue it. What does this mean? What is the goal that Cain should not miss? God has created humans in His image to be His partners in ruling over the world. All human beings are God’s image-

bearers and everyone must represent God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. But what Cain does to his brother is the opposite of that. He presents himself as having *authority* and *dominion* over his brother. He deprives his brother of the right to live. Instead of becoming a ruler over the created order, he chooses to rule over his coequal partner. We know what happened, Cain murdered his brother Abel and his blood cried out to the Lord.

The picture is the opposite of God's purposes for humankind. Later in Genesis 9:6, God commands humans not to shed one another's blood for everyone is created in the image of God. If the image of God represents the authority of God, it must be carried on God's terms. The authority is delegated along with the responsibility. This is to say, being rulers is more like being stewards. Therefore, what Cain does here is a redefinition of authority and power. The ruling and dominion get defined in terms of subduing fellow humans. It is opposite to the Kingdom of God. In other words, humans begin to rule the earth on their terms. Their autonomy is resulting in exploitation of each other.

We have seen previously that when God finished creating and ordering everything, He rests on the seventh day. We have seen that the rest is royal – it is like a king enthroning over his kingdom after ordering and furnishing it. We also noted that this seventh day does not have an end. This points out the purpose of God. He wanted His creation to remain the same – ordered and perfect – as humans rule over it. He intended humans to guard that goodness at the same time as they enjoy ruling over it and utilizing it for their purposes. *He wanted His royal rest – the royal enthronement – to continue without an end.* But what humans do here is bringing an end to the rest of God. It is not that God does not want to be concerned about His creation – that is the teaching of Deism and Epicureanism according to which God does not intervene in the universe and human affairs. The mess that humans create in the world disturbs God's rule and dominion. He cannot see His creation being filled with disorder and cries for justice heard all over there. It is more like God's own House – the cosmos – being attacked by those predators of human peace.

This is what happened in the case of Cain and Abel. When Cain redefined the rule and dominion in his terms and murdered

his *innocent* brother Abel, the blood of the victim cried out to the Lord from the earth. God cannot tolerate this – He cannot be at ease when His creation is disturbed. He responds to cry and brings justice. When it is said justice, I mean it in the context of the Hebrew Bible which refers to setting things right rather than punishing the criminals. God acts out of His justice to set things right. The result is Cain got expelled from his homeland. He becomes a relentless wanderer. A ground-tiller now becomes a keeper of the land that has no life. The same thing repeats: God investigates the person, sentences and banishes him just as it happened with Adam and Eve in the Garden.

In both of these cases, God's response must not be looked at as mere punishment rather handing humans to the consequences of their actions. Humankind's turning against God has ultimately led it to turn against itself. Here, humans desired to rule on their terms by knowing good and evil. God let them have it but the consequences are painful. This is how the life outside the Garden has set forth: a dysfunctional family, a restless wandering, and everything that ultimately led to a state of mayhem. These consequences are opposite to what humans have expected and more opposite to God's purpose for humanity and the world.

Continuing the reading of the further narrative, it shows how corrupt humanity has become. We hardly see humans partnering with God. Let's come to our basic discussion: God intended heaven and earth to be one. He wanted humans to partner with Him and He pleased to dwell along with humans. He is a different sort of God and wants to make His home among humans. But humans did not and do not always partner with God and this caused the broken relationships – the broken relationship with God and with the fellow humans. When humans choose to do what is good in their sight, it results in all kinds of mess on the earth. It is not simply that God has set apart Himself from humans but humans also wanted to push God out of their world. They desired independence and autonomy. Even today, we fail to trust God and partner with Him. The result is before our eyes.

Let us examine this biblical theme in our postmodern world. Today's society and all the structures that are related to it seek independence. And that independence is from the chains of religious thought and worldview. Nevertheless, it has benefited the world to achieve progress as long as this step was taken cautiously. But the extremism of this is secularism –

avoiding any thought about God. People today, as a stereotype of Adam and Eve, try to identify themselves outside the religious circle. They see God or religion as something that limits their freedom. Let me be precise in this, the Western world has abandoned religion altogether to achieve progress by leaving behind all these ancient and primitive stuff. This ideology of secularism has affected our culture too. So-called science and ideology of today's society project God as someone who restricts human freedom and progress. I am not against true science – the science that helps people to discover and innovate the new things that serve human good. But there are some ideological beliefs on which the post-modern philosophy stands which disorient people's belief in God – in any kind of God.

Look at the society that we have built by seeking freedom from *this* God. Yeah, we have achieved many heights. Yeah, we have progressed a lot. But look at the social structures and look at the condition of humankind. We have filled the society with all kinds of evil – greed, selfishness, broken relationships (hatred, murder, adultery, deception, disrespect, oppression, exploitation, riots, clashes... continue the list for yourself), warfare, disturbance of ecological balance, desire for power, money and sex, etc. Is this the progress we have achieved thus far? Is this humankind's nature? Is this the society that we have built for ourselves? Of course, there are ethics, law codes, legislations, judicial courts and principles of morality but they are just for a show. What we need are freedom and independence. We are not bothered about how our individualistic freedom and independence disturbs the freedom and peace of society.

We choose to do what is good in our eyes and we are handed over to our consequences. The earth is no longer as ordered and perfect as God intended it to be. Humans have become a threat to God's Kingdom. Instead of representing God, by bearing His image, we represent our selfish ideologies that continue to ruin the world.

## **2.5 CLEAN EARTH BUT NO PARTNER**

When God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, He stamped all of them as good, ordered and perfect. Human beings, God's image-bearers, are supposed to continue that goodness. Time and again, humans show up themselves as untrustworthy to God and they

ruin the earth instead of ruling it. When we come to Genesis 6, we see the whole earth is filled with tyranny. As humans continue to run their show, their actions become unbearable and inevitable. Warriors appear all over the scene – the giants who subdue the earth and doing all kinds of acts that finally made the world an uninhabitable place. There is no room for goodness, there is no place for order and there is no *fear of God*. All they want is to rule the world on their terms, even to the extreme. All their actions now threaten the Kingdom of God.

In the middle of all this description, the narrator of Genesis takes us to the heart of God. We notice God feeling sorry that he had made humankind on the earth. It grieved Him to His heart which finally led God to take a drastic decision – to blot out the human beings from the earth (Gen. 6:6-7). God's so sad that he created humankind (*Adam* in Hebrew which is a generic term for human beings). In simple words, God did not enrage over the disordered creation. He was not engulfed with anger and wrath in response to the mess that humans have created. Instead, it is shown that God is saddened over the things and He grieves and feels sorry. God began to experience the pain as the world stands hostile to Him. All the powers have joined together in revolting against God. This hostility made God sad. This is more like parental grief.

There is a question here that is generally asked by almost everyone who reads this passage in the Bible: Why does God need to repent? Isn't He an all-knowing and all-powerful God? If He is omniscient, He would have already known that this would happen and He might have created humans with all the future-knowledge. If so, why does God need to feel sorry for what He has made and why He wouldn't have avoided creating at all? Other extremists say that God has predestined everything out of His foreknowledge. All these arguments do not make sense to understand the God of the Hebrew Bible.

First of all, we need to understand that humans are not robots nor puppets in the creation of God. It is not that God has destined everything and the humans just play their role over here. This is against the biblical portrayal of humankind. God created humans to be His partners: to be stewards of His creation, to guard the order and to enjoy their lives as God's co-rulers and co-workers. Their purpose is not to act according to the command-line of God rather they are creatures with free-will and with free choice. In other words, they are in a state of freedom that they



could use either to partner with God or revolt against Him to disappoint Him. In this light, God's grief makes sense. When His partners fail to keep their vocation and continue to make their own selfish choices that result in ruining the order of His creation. It is a grief for the partners who no longer become sources of life and order in His world. God has to act. It is not simply because He is superior to the human race instead it is because He is an emblem for goodness, order and perfection. He could not be happy when His creation lies in ruin.

The narrative of the flood and Noah's Ark means much more than God's act of justice. It is not simply to be read as evidence to prove that God is just and intolerant to sin. Although those themes lie within the framework of biblical theology, the narrative of the flood is more than that. When we closely read it, we notice that what happens with the flood is the *decreation*. Previously in Genesis 1:2, we read the chaotic and useless state of the world before God's intervention and creation. The earth was covered with deep waters and it is simply uninhabitable. It is useless until the time God started to work on it by ordering and perfecting it. Now, in the narrative of the flood, the whole theme reverses. The dry land is covered again with deep waters. The waters that were separated on the second day of the creation, now come down and make the earth an uninhabitable place once again. The earth becomes lifeless and useless.

While God intended to enthrone over the creation and rule it in and through humans, God's co-rulers have become tyrants and wicked, causing massive destruction. The creation progresses not in the state of order but reverses to its original state of disorder. It is not simply to be read as God's punishment but also could be seen as the consequence of human rule and human dominion over creation. Though God is active in this process of decreation, He intends to *reboot* the whole system back to its intended state of functionality.

Noah's Ark and all that is in it stand as the hope for the new beginning that is about to start as the flood recedes. Noah and his family stand as the hope for a new humanity that would choose to partner with God and guard the creation by bearing the image of their creator. The narrator of Genesis introduces Noah to us in the genealogy of chapter 5. Noah's name means *to rest* or *comfort*. The name reminds us of the calm, peace and perfection that was in the beginning. In a world that has forsaken God's vocation and in the world of dysfunctional families, broken relationships,

violence, toiling, suffering and all kinds of wickedness, the name Noah becomes an announcement of good news to the creation and humanity. It is like announcing a better future for the hopeless world. And indeed that was his function and vocation.

When Noah, his family and all that is in the ark step out on the dry land, God makes a covenant with all of them. The language in Genesis 9 is so similar to the language that we see in the beginning. God commands them to be fruitful and multiply. The intention of God is, once again, to fill the earth with this goodness, righteousness and perfect order. Just as God blessed Adam, He also blesses Noah and his family. God commands them not to shed the blood of one another for everyone in the image of God. God also makes a promise of *never-again* destroying the earth.

The key theme here is *covenant* – or partnership in our words. God once again makes a partnership with this righteous family who stand as His representatives on earth. They are supposed to become stewards of God's creation. God now wants them to fill the earth with His glory. He now wants to express His light and life through this family as they continue to flourish on the earth. He does not want to hear again the outcry of anyone's blood. He does not want the earth to be *decreated* through them. The blessing of *new life* and *new beginning* must continue to flow through them. The *newness* of the earth must be kept undisturbed. In other words, *God wanted to rest - to enthrone over everything - in and through Noah and his family as they keep the land unpolluted and unthreatened with their actions.*

The earth again becomes an inhabitable place. A blessing is pronounced over all the creation. This is to say, the same cosmos that was in the beginning returns and lets God enthrone over the renewed creation. Humankind's relationship with the rest of the creation and within itself has been restored to *normality*. This is what God expected and this is the vocation of this New Adam – to continue this *normality* and *orderliness* from generation to generation. Humans ought to join their hands with God in ruling over the creation and expressing His royal image and likeness. This is all about the good news of Noah – heaven and earth are reunited and tied together with a bond of partnership where all the creation is blessed by God.

This is a beautiful vision for the renewed cosmos. But then again sad news is announced in contrast to the *Noahic good news*. A curse begins

in a world of blessedness. From where does this curse come from? It is from none other than Noah's family itself. Noah plants a vineyard and he gets too drunk and lies naked. One of his sons exposes the nakedness of his father to the others. The other sons take this seriously and cover their father's nakedness. After sometime Noah wakes up from his sleep, realizes what his sons have done and curses the one who tried to bring shame to his father. Look closer, the wordplay is the same as in the Garden. The point here is that the *newness* of humanity began to fade away as the curse begins from the same family by which God intended to bring *rest* on the earth.

The partnership between God and humankind begins to breach once again. The later generations of Noah come to a plain in the East. The decision they make now is to build a tower that reaches heaven<sup>9</sup> so that they could remain stable by making their name great. What repeats in Genesis 11:1-9 is the same that we see in Genesis 3 and 6. Humans fail to carry out their vocation. Instead of saying it a failure, it is more appropriate to call it a deliberate rejection of God's purposes. Just as in the case with Adam and Eve, the nations that descended through Noah now try to rise above their state. They are planning to make a name for their own by shunning God's plan to restore Edenic life through them.

There are a couple of themes that we could notice here. Firstly, humankind's thirst for *more* – more power and greatness. Secondly, human beings reject God and their vocation to satisfy their thirst. The consequences, once again, are sad, evil and abnormal. When God looked down at humans, He saw them toiling and working to make their name great. They are toiling to rebel against God by forsaking His command to multiply and fill the earth. Instead of filling the earth, they plan to make a single tower. They are working together in unity to oppose God Himself by satisfying their selfish thirst. Once again the world is filled with humans that are no longer partnering with God. They no longer support God's plan of bringing Edenic life back once again through them.

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9        The Tower of Babel could be understood as similar to Ziggurats. Ancient people believed that the gods dwell in high places and therefore every hilltop is a proper place for worship. Some tower-like structures were built in the lower places as a substitute to hills which are known as Ziggurats. These are built to combine the realms of heaven and earth. The Tower of Babel could be a similar structure.

God comes down once again to look at what humans have done. This is the same thing that happened when Adam and his wife broke their trust in God and when Cain murdered his innocent brother Abel. Human rebellion becomes too strong for God to continue His partnership with them. God confuses the languages at the tower of Babel and scatters them throughout the nations. When they have shunned God by rejecting His vocation, God is also forced to shun humankind.

You might have been thinking about what sort of God He is. He frequently fails in carrying out His mission. How pitiful He is as His partners are disloyal to Him. Well, the response is quite opposite. The miracle throughout these narratives is not that God is an utter failure although it is humans who fail Him. What is unexpected in the narrative is that *God still allows them to live*. His blessing of life continues even amid humans' curse and plight. In Eden, God allowed Adam and Eve *to live* despite the complicated realities they are to face. Cain was allowed to live despite his relentless wandering. Again the humankind is allowed to live even as they can no longer partner with God and their desires are thwarted. The miracle in the story is a God who never gives up on humankind, who still allows His blessing to function in the lives of the unfaithful partners and He still works on to bring a blessing to all the nations.

The long narrative of God and humanity has ended up in a state of *confusion* – in Babel or Babylon. This theme occurs once again in the Hebrew Bible. Let's recapitulate what we have discussed in this section. When human society is filled with violence, broken relationships, wickedness and all kinds of evil, it makes earth an uninhabitable place – both for God and for pure humanity. When humans become degraded and behave like wild beasts, it makes God sad and feels sorry for His partners. Heaven is no longer combined with the earth. God's dwelling place cannot be filled with all sorts of evil which is the opposite of God's character. The earth cannot be the home of God as humans continue to fill it with their *foolish wisdom* that forces God to step out of the scene. As humans continue to play their show on their terms, *decreation* becomes the ultimate consequence.

On the flip side of the story, God rescues a righteous man and intends to fill the earth with His glory once again through this family.

The New Eden has to become the result as this new humanity steps onto the renewed earth. Salvation, therefore, is not a means to have a personal benefit rather a means to fill the earth with the image and likeness of God by partnering with Him. God's Spirit must please to dwell with humans. The good news of *rest* has to be announced in a world that has undergone unbearable restlessness because of human actions. But humans again try to push God out of the scene, they want the earth for their *greed* not for their *need*. Human beings, time and again, try to reclaim their autonomous power, which God allows them to have, but finally, the consequences become the opposite of their desires. What happens, therefore, is the earth becomes *abnormal* – Godless and without responsible humankind. What continues to show up is not the *natural expression of human life* rather a kind of *unnatural and beastly character* that ultimately ruins the creation. But God is not given up, humans fail to keep the partnership but God searches for the *right partner* so that He could restore the creation and He could make the world to be *natural, normal and habitable* – *ordered and perfect* – by healing the society and restoring the broken relationships and interlocking heaven and earth.

## 2.6 COME OUT

Great nations begin to emerge following the incident of Babel. The narrative shows how the nations, altogether, fail to partner with God in creating a new Eden and experience the reality of heaven and earth is one. Nations have forsaken God and so does God have shunned them. God has allotted them nations according to the number of their gods (Deut. 32:8). It is like a father dismissing his disobedient children and letting them follow their own ways. Here, at Babel, God judges the nations and scatters them. They are exiled out and allowed to follow their own gods and have their own lifestyle. When Paul summarizes the plot of humankind in Romans 1:18-32, he makes his reference to the condition of humanity as portrayed in Genesis 1-11 and says that God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. In other words, nations have proved themselves to be unfitting to God's plan of creating a new life on earth that resembles the life that was in Eden.

Is it what the story of the Bible is all about? Is it just a story of God who could not find a better partner for Himself to reunite the realities of heaven and earth? Well, this is not what it is all about. Yes, people fail

God, they fail to consider God as trustworthy enough for them to reign the world. But there is a much longer story ahead which finally leads up to an even greater vision of the world that becomes a reality in and through one *perfect* human being. The narrative of Genesis looks forward with a hope for a new humanity that would become a partner with God and create a new life on the earth.

The narrators of Genesis start to narrate a detailed genealogy once again following the incident of the Tower of Babel. Once a detailed genealogy has been narrated in Genesis 5 in the backdrop of the human civilization that is gradually being corrupted. The genealogy of Genesis 5 finally leads to an announcement of good news through the name of a man named Noah with whom a new beginning is about to take place. Again, a similarly fashioned genealogy appears in Genesis 11 in the backdrop of Babel, beginning with Noah's son Shem and finally leading up to a person through whom a new beginning is about to take place. Who is this another man that carries out the good news in the light of the nations that have forsaken God and satisfied with their gods? Doubtlessly, this is Abraham.

While the story of humankind has ended up in the condition of Babel and scattered over the face of the earth, a new hope emerges in chapter 12 of Genesis where Yahweh calls out a man named Abram and promises that He will make him a great nation. He called him out of his father's house, his kindred and his country. This needs to be understood in the ancient cultural context. Leaving a country, kindred and the father's house means a disconnection with all the gods related to these realms. The ancients worshipped deities that are connected to their nation or city (patron deities), and the gods that are associated with their tribe or clan (tribal or clan deities), and the gods that are related to their family and ancestors (ancestral deities). Therefore, when Abraham was called by Yahweh, it is an implied understanding that he has to be disassociated with all the deities of his family, people and the country along with their cultic practices and has to follow Him.

Certainly, he was a childless man with great wealth but he was promised by God that out of this man shall come forth a nation. God also promised that He would make his name great. This is quite a counter-narrative against what happened in the previous chapter. While the people at Babel strived to make their name great, they ended up in failure and

dislocation, here we see a man's name becoming great not by his efforts but by his God.

Nevertheless, the call of Abraham is not a mere selection of God out of the entire humankind. The purpose of Abraham was to become a blessing for all the families of the earth. In and through his family, all the nations must be blessed. Therefore, the call of Abraham was not a selection (eliminating all others by preferring one) rather it was an election by which Abraham became a representative of God on the earth and he would also represent humanity before God. This is to say, when God does something in the family of Abraham, the ultimate effect of God's work benefits the nations. When we look closer, Abraham's story begins where the world's story came to its climax. It was from Babylon (Babel/Chaldea) that Abraham comes out. He was not called because of any worth as he was identified with the rest of the peoples. He was an idol worshipper, a pagan yet was chosen by God so that he can become a partner with God in bringing blessing to the world that has been living in the shadow of cursed life.

Abraham becomes an inheritance of God while all other nations have become foreign to the partnership with God. Against the background of Babel, Abraham was called out to be a nation, a nation of God. The purpose of God was to bring the Edenic life in and through Abraham. While all other gods have been allotted to the nations, Yahweh Himself becomes the God of Abraham and his family Israel. In other words, Abraham and his family become the people of Yahweh to represent Him on the earth.

The prominent theme that dominates throughout the story of Abraham and his family is *a covenant* (partnership). God makes a covenant with Abraham – He establishes a partnership with him – and promises *land* to his family. This is a triangular relationship between God, people and the land. The Promised Land and the people that live in it becomes an expression of God's light and life on earth as it is heaven. God's covenant with Abraham is further established in the very body of every man born in his family. It is circumcision. Instead of seeing it as a mere religious rite, we must see it as the expression or mark of God's relationship with His people. Abraham and his family, therefore, become partners with God, not for their benefit but for carrying out the vocation of God.

However, just as in the case of the previous narratives, one of the crucial element of the covenant becomes *trust*. Trust in God is not merely an expression of belief in the existence of God or the presence of God rather it is considering God as trustworthy, reliable, truthful and loyal to His people. When God promised Abraham a nation and land as a part of His covenant with him, he was a childless man in his old age and a wandering animal keeper. But despite these negative realities, he *trusted* in God. This faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). Because of Pauline usage of these terms in the New Testament, while elaborating on justification by faith, this statement is misunderstood by many of the modern readers. When it is said that Abraham trusted in God, it does not mean he simply believed in One True God or he believed that God exists and He is for real. The context in which the term *trust* is used here is about a partnership, a covenant. Abraham considered God as trustworthy and capable of bringing forth His promises and loyal to His covenant. Such trust in God is the foundational stone in the partnership between God and humankind.

There were times when Abraham and other patriarchs failed to put their trust in God and sought to make their own decisions. Sometimes such an autonomous attitude led to broken relationships and chaotic situations. Sometimes their own decisions ruined the lives of others (e.g. consider Hagar who was exploited a lot). There were times when they went through tests – uncertainties of life – and failed to trust God. However, time and again God established his faithfulness with Abraham and his family despite their failures. At the same time, we could also find the blessing and promise of God continuing through their lives whenever they trusted in God.

Through Abraham comes a new family, a new nation and a new life that stands as hope for the rest of humankind that is ended up in Babel. God chooses, elects, a nation for Himself so that He can partner with them and bring a New Eden in the land that He has promised to them. Therefore, the family of Abraham is new humanity and a new partner with whom a firm covenant was established and to whom God has committed Himself. This does not mean that He is partial in choosing a nation instead it must be seen as another opportunity for humankind to reign with God and bring a new society on earth. As they trust in this God and observe His statutes, the earth fills with the glory of God as He comes down, dwells and walks among these people. The nation of Israel



becomes God's representative on earth by presenting a life that creates a society where God's goodness, order and perfection continue to be expressed in and through them.

If we just go back to the opening pages of our Bible, we find God creating humankind in His image and likeness. He blesses them to be fruitful and multiply and fill all the earth. Humankind, not only individual humans but also humankind as a whole, is supposed to bear the image of their creator as they flourish and subdue the earth. There is a diversity within humankind – as male and female. There is much more diversity yet to come as this family bear children and they eventually multiply and become nations. Despite such diversified realities, humankind collectively must bear the image of God who created them. They are supposed to fill the earth with the glorious presence of God as they express His life and dominion on earth as it is in heaven.

The biblical vision for humankind is so high and beautiful but things get reversed and perverted because of humans' choice to live a life on their terms. The consequences become so harsh and serious and lead humankind into a system of broken relationships, hatred, violence, intolerance, selfishness, immorality and greed for power, wealth and sex. Siblings become rivals of each other and the nations that come out through them eventually become enemies of one another – slaughtering, plundering and subduing one another. While God purposed humans to bear His image, the choices and actions of humankind distort this image and become independent from God Himself. The result is they *decreate* the beautiful creation and bring all the chaos and darkness onto the earth. Heaven and earth as overlapping reality begin to diminish and time and again humans fail to keep their partnership with God despite the chances given.

Abraham is an alternative to God's way of bringing a new life to earth. Unlike Noah who was saved from the great destructive flood because of his righteousness, Abraham was called out and was made righteous. This is to say, in the days of Noah, all the evil ones were eliminated while a good one was kept safe so that a new beginning may happen through him. Yet, it did not bring the result as expected and the consequence is that the entire humankind, once again, does not fit to partner with God. Now, in the case of Abraham, a person was elected and a nation was created through him so that they can partner with Him and disseminate

His life and light on earth as they carry out His vocation. In other words, the nations have to witness the glory of God in and through the life of the people of Israel. Abraham and his family become a legitimate partner to God in a world that betrayed Him for the sake of their own choices. In a world of brokenness, amidst the humankind that is living in the shadow of death, in a cosmos that has become disordered and imperfect, God goes in search of a partner not just to solve out all the mess but also to establish faithful humankind that trusts in Him and partners with Him to bring the heaven and earth closer once again. The narrative of this family continues throughout the Hebrew Bible and consummates in the New Testament through different trajectories and complexities. The narrative is long, filled with suspension and tragedies, loyalty and radical visions.

## CHAPTER THREE

# LIBERATED TO PARTNER

Just imagine for a while that you are an elite and honoured person. Also, imagine that you go in search of a spouse for yourself but find no one fit to live with you and be loyal to you. Suppose that you just randomly choose a person and train him/her to be an eligible partner who can live with you and respect your aspirations. Then you marry that person thinking that, unlike others, s/he would be loyal to you and bring respect to you. You built a beautiful house to stay together. And it was a happy beginning. But all of a sudden, there is bad news, you found out that your partner is no longer loyal to you (cheating on you), s/he no longer respects your goals and visions, and no longer supports you in anything. You try to correct him/her by using different methods but every time you try to re-establish your partnership, s/he turns out to be worse. Things get bad but you are such a person who is slow to react harshly. You want to divorce him/her but do not go for it too quickly. You try your best to be patient with him/her. But finally, you banish him/her out of your house. S/he is put to shame in public. S/he has become the subject of disgrace in the public and s/he finds no place of rest. That's a sorrowful end.

If you are familiar with your Bible, you would know that the whole picture I'm trying to create is a reconstruction of the biblical narrative

about God and Israel. The story of God and Israel as His partners supposed to be building a new nation and a new homeland is set against the backdrop of the nations that have betrayed Him for their own choices. The narrative of Abraham and his family is supposed to be the opposite of the narrative of rebellion, sorrow and chaos that was preceding it. Abraham and his family were supposed to be a blessing for the nations as they build a new Eden-like world that would attract the world to itself as it emanates life and light throughout the earth. But it was not what had taken place. Time and again, in the narrative of the Bible, Israel has proven herself to be a disloyal partner who is no different from the rest of the world.

However, God did not make a sudden decision to abandon them instead was patient with them and tried to discipline them so that they can become better and partner with Him in bringing life and light in the world that is living in the shadow of evil and death because of its own choices. Israel was supposed to be a different sort of nation just as their God, Yahweh, was different from other deities in the ancient world. But the narrative of the Hebrew Bible ends in a tragic way where the people are exiled from their homeland and no longer partner with God. Alongside the tragedy, there is also a hopeful imagination for the new heavens and new earth. In this chapter, however, we would focus on the narrative of the Bible from Exodus to the Babylonian exile of Israel and in the next chapter, we would discuss the promise of the new world in protest against the existing realities.

### **3.1 I CALLED MY SON OUT OF EGYPT**

We have seen previously that God has promised Abraham and his descendants of land as their inheritance. The promise was a part of the covenant between God and Abraham. With the promise of a people and land, both of them become part of God's covenant which is to say the relationship between God and the people is also reflected in people's relationship with the land. In other words, it echoes the theme of the Garden of Eden where the connection between the land and the people is defined by the people's trust and loyalty to God's vocation. Let us keep this picture in mind as we continue to look into the narrative of exodus and Promised Land.

The Book of Genesis closes with Israel in Egypt residing as foreigners. We know that Jacob and his descendants went down to Egypt and settled there in the times of a great famine. However, the family does not return to their homeland which was promised to them despite the end of the famine. This also reflects the life of pastoral nomads in the ancient world who would settle around the fertile land for the sustenance of their flocks and herds. The Book of Exodus opens with the narrative of Israel flourishing in Egypt – a nation being formed in a foreign land that was not promised to them. But soon, as the narrative says, a new Pharaoh has come to reign Egypt who tries to suppress the growth of Israel in Egypt.

The opening chapters of the Book of Exodus narrate to us the life and conditions of Israel as the people who become victims of the cruelty and tyranny of this Pharaoh who employs different methods to somehow suppress the flourishing of these people. He begins this by enslaving the people of Israel by harsh means. He makes them build cities for him and his people so that, as he imagined, they would stop increasing because of the anxiety of their workload. However, when he saw that it didn't work, he took even more harsh and cruel steps. He commanded the Hebrew midwives first and then to all the Egyptians later, to kill all the infant boys who will be born now on. The first chapter of the Exodus portrays the harsh realities under which the nation of Israel began to emerge and take form. They were subjected to live in the shadow of the pharaoh's tyranny which made their lives worse and miserable without hope.

But in chapter 2 of the Exodus narrative, we come across a family. In the times when all the new-born baby boys are being thrown into the river Nile, in the setting of ruthless oppression of Pharaoh and his people, a boy happens to be born in one of the families who later turns out to be the new leader of these people. The mother rears and nourishes the child in secret for three months. But unable to hide this baby boy longer, his mother leaves the child in the river Nile putting him in a basket. No wonder, this boy was also indirectly thrown into the water. This incident reflects the life of slaves in such a setting where there seems to be no hope for their generation. Because of their circumstances, pain, grief and burden, when a new child is born into the family, it would be bad news more than a celebration. It would be even worse if the new baby happens to be a boy.

Now, the baby was left in the river Nile. He is exposed to every kind of external danger. There is little hope that this boy has a future because he is a slave child whom nobody wants. But something happens here. This boy finds compassion in the sight of Pharaoh's daughter who discovered the child amidst the bushes of the river. It is a miracle that he was taken out of the water and his name reflects the same – Moses, one who is taken out of water. The baby Moses becomes a prototype of Israel's future. This boy who was rescued from death would rescue all of his people from the tyranny and cruelty of Pharaoh and from ruthless Egyptians who act as puppets of Pharaoh.

Moses had to escape from Egypt after forty years of his upbringing in Pharaoh's house. However, after another forty years, he had an encounter with God of Israel who sent him back to Egypt to liberate the people. We know his encounter with a burning bush. When Moses approached it he was warned that it was a sacred place. Wait, what? Sacred space on a mountain in the wilderness? In an uninhabited place? This is strange. Heaven and earth intersect in a place where there is no life. But this is the picture that we get in the first pages of the Bible – God creating a life from the earth that was wild and wasteful. Moses was commissioned to bring the people of Israel to this mountain so that God can make a covenant with Israel and lead them to the Promised Land.

When Moses stood before Pharaoh as a representative of Yahweh and as a representative of the slave labourers and asked to liberate the Hebrew slaves so that they can worship their God in the wilderness, the response of Pharaoh was like 'Who is this Yahweh that I should obey? Who are you to command me to liberate the people?' (Exod. 5:2). This Yahweh was strange to Pharaoh and Egyptians. They hardened their hearts and did not let the people go. They might have thought that the God of Israel was a kind of one of their gods whose power is limited.

Yahweh and his servant Moses had to respond in power. God demonstrated His power in Egypt before the eyes of all the Egyptians and before Israel. All the plagues that were brought in Egypt were direct judgements of the gods of Egypt. It was also a judgement against Pharaoh who himself was revered as a divine being by the Egyptians. Hardening of Pharaoh's heart as a means of exposing the wickedness of his nature. The plagues were also a reversal of the violence of Egyptians against themselves. The way they have treated Israel is now becoming their own

experience. The same cruelty and oppression that they have expressed now turned against them making them victims of severe plagues. These also served as signposts for Israel to trust that their God, Yahweh, is trustworthy and powerful enough to bring them out of Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land.

By the death of all the firstborn, the Hebrew slaves were set free. Just as Moses found compassion when he was taken out of the river, the Israelites also found compassion in the sight of Egyptians and they let them go with exploits. The Hebrew slaves marched out as liberated peoples and as a great army, the army of Yahweh. Finally, Pharaoh and his armies were defeated at the Red Sea. Yahweh and his people triumphed over their oppressors. This great event in Israel's history is known as the exodus event and commemorated every year during the feast of Passover.

The language and elaboration of the exodus narrative seem to be so exaggerated. However, it must not be kept aside as a mere invention of Israelites about their origin. The purpose of the whole narrative is not to give us the point to point history of Israel rather it must be seen as a tension between human dignity and the identity of Israel. The exodus narrative depicts the character of God, Yahweh, who cannot tolerate any kind of exploitation of the people. He is set against the oppressors and cruel tyrants who treat humans as property. He cannot be at rest when he hears the cries of the oppressed and suffering. He acts justly: the judgement is not simply a kind of punishment rather it is setting things right. Israel believed that their God cares for those who happen to live in the shadow of death. He overthrows pharaohs to bring a new life to the people who otherwise are subjected to cruelty and death. Even for the Israelite prophets, the exodus theme becomes central for their message. The theme of the exodus is bad news for the tyrant lords who threaten God's created order and is good news for the oppressed.

God leads the people of Israel to Mount Sinai where He had appeared to Moses. It is here, the slaves become the people of God. Yahweh, their God, enters into covenant partnership with His people making them a nation set apart for Himself. He has called them out of Egypt to create an alternative society and an alternative kingdom that is set against the societies and the kingdoms of the world. What begins with exodus is not merely a new religion rather a new society whose faith and life radically breaks with the existing realities of the world. A new nation is being formed which would trust the Lord and be loyal to Him. Through

this new nation, God wants to bring the Edenic life back once again in the Promised Land.

### **3.2 THE PEOPLE CALLED BY HIS NAME**

The Lord led the liberated people to the foot of Mount Sinai where He had appeared to Moses and made a covenant with them so that they can be His people and He can be their God. The Sinaitic covenant is so central to the history and faith of Israel because it was here where their faith has been formed and their identity as the people of God is defined. A large section of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament deals with the law which is often termed as Mosaic Law which consists of at least 613 commandments. All of these commandments made sense to the people in the ancient world more than they make sense to the people today. The law is so central to the covenant because it is something that defines the meaning and function of a partnership between the two parties. Therefore, breaking the law is equal to breaking the covenant.

The nutshell of the meaning and function of this covenant appears to us in Exodus 19:5b-6 where the Lord says, "Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." This statement expresses the position of Israel in its world as a partner with God. Although the whole earth and all that is in it belongs to Yahweh, He has chosen Israel for Himself. This goes back to the election of Abraham which is set against the backdrop of the nations' rebellion against God. While the Lord let the nations have their own gods and follow their own ways of life – a life that brings pain, suffering and death – He has chosen one person among them and formed a nation through Him and promised a land to the people. In other words, Israel and her land become a portion for Yahweh in a world that could no longer partner with Him.

The election of the nation Israel and her partnership with God should not be understood as an act of favouritism. Yahweh, here, defines the position and function of Israel as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. What does this mean? Why did He choose them? Israel as a nation serves as a kingdom of priests among the nations. Their function is to represent God before the nations and the nations before God. The function of a priest is to mediate between the deity and the people. He stands in the sacred space as a representative of his people by which whatever he does in the sacred space ultimately benefits the people. And when he stands



before the people, he stands as a representative of the deity. The position of the priest becomes void when he stands indifferent from the people or when he stands indifferent to the deity. Similarly, Israel as Yahweh's nation stands as a priestly kingdom not merely to enjoy the benefits but stands in the sacred space, in God's Land and in God's Presence, through whom the light and life of God flow into the world.

Israel is also supposed to be a holy nation. The word holy simply does not mean purity rather it refers to uniqueness and dedication to something. Israel, as Yahweh's people, is supposed to live as a nation that is dedicated to Yahweh and at the same time unique in its world. They are not supposed to live, act, or behave like everyone else surrounding them. Among the nations, they are supposed to stand as a nation that is truly loyal to its God and show to the world how it looks like to be the people of Yahweh. It is also to show how it looks like when Yahweh is the true in-charge of this world. Above all, it is to show how it looks like when this God dwells among the people.

Many Christians today simply push the law of the Old Testament to a corner stating that it is no longer valid because the Old has gone and the New has come. For the postmodern world, the Mosaic Law is just a relic of the ancient worldviews and it is no longer relevant to the people today because everything has advanced and there is no point in keeping those age-old norms. Both of these parties have missed the real purpose of the Law. Yes, it is ancient but the message of the Law is so relevant even today, though not literally.

The whole purpose of the law is to make Israel the people of God. It defines what it means to be the people of Yahweh and what makes them special in the world. It begins with the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments which is the summary of the content of the rest of the Law. All but two of these commandments are prohibitions. These prohibitions do not simply mean that they must remain neutral in these cases rather it calls them to do the opposite. For example, if they are asked not to murder, it does not simply mean that they must be idle rather it means that they must honour human life and its dignity.

Exodus 20-23, Leviticus 17-27 and Deuteronomy 6-27, all of these sections, specifically deal with the dos and don'ts of the people of Israel. The law codes that are covered in these sections are not an imposition of a heavy burden on the people but it is a definition of the people of God. The

way they live in the Promised Land must be different from the way how the other nations live. Following these laws brings life in a society that is ordered and perfect. The commandments make people more humane.

What happens at Sinai is not simply an invention of a new religion rather it is the formation of a new people, an alternative society and an alternative kingdom that stands unique in the world. This is a society that represents neither Egypt nor the Canaanite culture. The people in this society do not exercise mastery over others. They do not be anxious about their workload – they deliberately take a day off every week for rest. They are not selfish of their income because they leave out some of the produce in their fields so that the poor and needy among them can enjoy it. They do not oppress the resident foreigners among them alternatively letting their slaves go free after six years of their service. They do not grab the property of others, nor crush someone for not paying debts instead they forgive all the debts in every Jubilee year and everyone gets his/her property back and the land gets equally distributed every fifty years. They do not encourage any extramarital relationship because they consider marriage as the most honourable bond which must not be defiled. The children honour their parents. They do not blame their neighbours, they do not spread rumours, they do not steal, and there is no cry of poor and oppressed heard in the city streets. Everyone in society is reliable and trustworthy because they do not spread falsehood. There are no reports of crimes in this nation and even if there is one, the action is taken immediately and the loss is compensated. The rulers of this nation do not work for their selfish greed. Justice is never denied. Things get right so fast. There is no inter-tribal conflict as everyone lives in peace and harmony.

All of them together worship their God, they honour His presence among them, and they emanate His glorious life among the nations. They do not need to sacrifice their children to this God and He hates it also. They do not need worrying to satisfy the material needs of this God because He is the provider of everything. They do not need worrying about becoming victims of the unpredictable mood swings of this God because He is stable. They do not need to make their daughters temple prostitutes. Instead, they can enjoy the presence of this God. They celebrate festivals, not for the cultic means but to pass on the traditions of their faith from generation to generation to sustain their religion.

Wow! One might exclaim by looking at this vision. This is just like heaven is just here on the earth. This is what we mean by saying Israel was an alternative society. Their religion and faith was good news in the ancient world because this is a different sort of God. The vision of the society in the light of the covenant relationship is greater good news in the world both ancient and present. In Psalm 144, the psalmist envisages the life of a nation whose God is Yahweh:

*May our sons in their youth be like plants full grown,  
our daughters like corner pillars,  
cut for the building of a palace.  
May our barns be filled,  
with produce of every kind;  
may our sheep increase by thousands,  
by tens of thousands in our fields,  
and may our cattle be heavy with young.  
May there be no breach in the walls, no exile,  
and no cry of distress in our streets.  
Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall;  
happy are the people whose God is the LORD.*

This is what it means to be the people of Yahweh. The law may be ancient but the message is this. The people of God form a society of freedom. It is a society that is free from fear of one another, free from violence, injustice, oppression, disloyalty, broken relationships and all kinds of evil. This is a society for which God has been looking for. This is a prototype of God's vision for the world. When the nations behold this nation and the glory of Yahweh among them, they will be astonished and bring their glory into this nation. All of this is what God was expecting to see among His people as they live as His partners in the world.

### **3.3 GOD'S TENT AND THE HOLY MOUNTAIN**

All the peoples in the ancient world settled themselves around the sacred space. Sacred space is a piece of land that is set apart from the rest of the land as consecrated to some deity. Sacred space is not merely a temple. Temple itself is a part of sacred space. Ancients believed that their gods would dwell among them. They set apart a part of their space to let their deity dwell in their midst. Sacred space is a place where heaven and earth would intersect. The temple is understood as the house of deity and

the image in the temple is the visible embodiment of his presence. The image in itself is not a god/goddess rather it is the visible expression of his/her presence. Therefore, all the cultic rituals are centred in this sacred space and they understood these rituals as meeting the requirements of the deities.

The sacred space was usually venerated as the holiest ground and the temple in it is the permanent dwelling of their gods. It is the place where the deity finds his/her rest. The rest is not merely disengagement from all the works rather it is engagement in the maintenance of what has been well-organized. The rest of the deity could be disturbed through any means and the people must guard it. The priests serve as the mediators between gods and humans. Often these sacred spaces appear to us in the higher places because they believed that their gods dwell in high places. Moreover, the sacred space is decorated and furnished beautifully as though it is like a pleasant garden. Therefore, the sacred space fits for gods to dwell among their people who look after their needs and in turn they do favour these people. However, their power and order are limited to the boundaries of their nations.

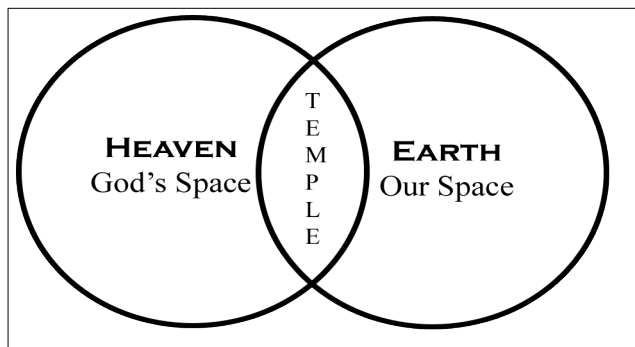
The sanctity of the heaviness of the sacred space becomes intensified as it comes to the centre. This is to say that the presence of the deity so intense at the centre of the sacred space. The presence of the sacred space defined the settlement of the people. Usually, the dwelling of the people is around the sacred space. The visible presence of the deity is both a reassurance that their god/goddess is with them and at the same time it is also a factor of terror for the people to keep the sanctity of their space. However, the sanctity of life in connection with the sacred space was much more concerned about the ritual practices than morality and human dignity.

The centrality of the sacred space helps us to understand the foreign attacks on the temples. When a rival nation comes to attack and destroy a kingdom, they not only destroy and plunder the city but also destroy the sacred space. In other words, they aim to drive out the gods out of their sacred space. This is a means to show that the gods of the weak nations have been defeated by the powerful kings. In other words, the powerful kings pronounce victory not only over the people but also over their gods. In response to this, when a kingdom falls, the people trade their god for the sake of the gods of their captors. They assimilate into the culture of

the powerful ones and thus their religion and identity get vanished in antiquity.

Likewise, even the people of Israel had a sacred space for Yahweh, their God. But this sacred space differs in many ways from those of the people around them. In the Book of Exodus, Yahweh's presence can be seen even in the wilderness. The first instance is in Exodus 3 where we see the scene of a burning bush. It was declared as the holy place which in the ancient language is understood as the sacred space where the realm of God overlaps with the realm of humans. Another instance of Yahweh's glory is the pillar of the cloud. It is the visible expression of God's immediate presence among Israel throughout their journey. The pillar of the cloud is something that connects heaven and the earth.

After issuing the law and order, Yahweh orders Israel to erect a tabernacle – a tent where God and people could meet. He gives all the instructions to prepare the tabernacle and once the tabernacle is prepared, the camping of Israel will be resettled according to the boundaries of the sacred space. When the tabernacle is completed and dedicated, the visible presence of Yahweh comes into this tent.

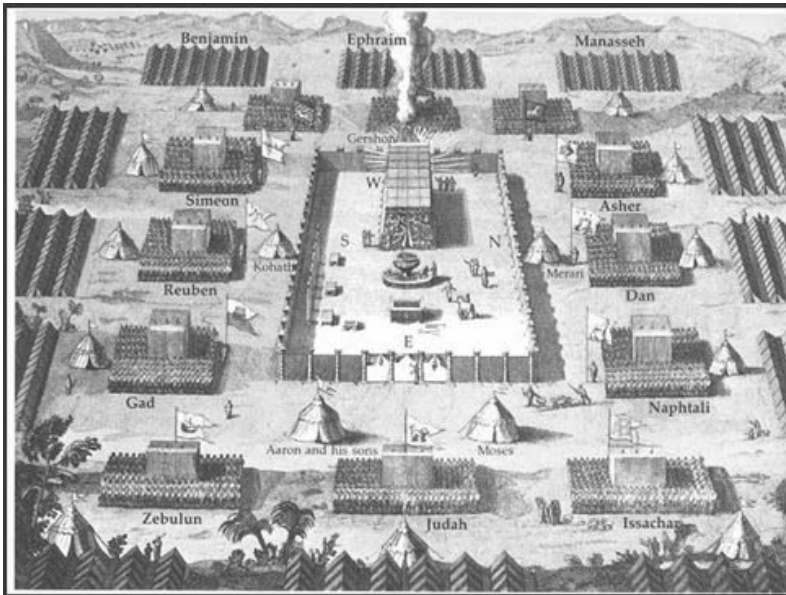


*An Illustration of the Temple*

Israelites believed that their God does not have any physical form and they cannot erect any image or idol that completely depicts this God and they are forbidden to do so. However, time and again, throughout their journey to the Promised Land, Yahweh was with them and His presence was manifested as a pillar of cloud. The radiance and the heaviness this presence has created among them is defined as the glory (*kavod*) of God. This is to say, the glory of Yahweh is a visible expression of His presence among Israel. The glory of God is a reassurance for the

itinerants that their God is with them. It is by looking at this radiating presence of God, they will be strengthened and reassured in their journey. However, the presence of God is also described as a dangerous zone. It can devour and destroy people. The whole Book of Leviticus deals with this issue. It comes with dense details about the rites and the social norms which Israelites need to observe to keep the sanctity of the sacred space. In other words, the Presence of God and His holiness becomes a blessing to the people if they could keep His instructions.

The tabernacle is the place where the presence of God interacts with the sociological structures. It is where the space of God intersects with the space of human beings. This is the place where heaven and earth meet together. The uniqueness of this tabernacle is that it travels along with the people and throughout their itinerary in the wilderness, the people witnessed the glory of their God is in their midst. It is this sacred presence in the wilderness that helped the people to camp even in the lifeless, deadly and uninhabitable wilderness. It is evident that the presence of the sacred space in Israel was not meant for them to take care of the needs of their God rather, on the opposite, this God takes care of the needs of the people throughout their journey. What the people have to do is just abide by His instructions to keep the sanctity of His presence.



*Israel's settlement with the tabernacle at the centre*

The tabernacle, or the temple in later times, was like a micro-cosmos that brings the people and God together. Israelites believed that their sacred space was not only a focal point of their land but also the centre of the whole earth. It can be simply understood when we look at the ancient maps where the land of Israel comes in the centre. This temple is the holiest spot on earth. When King Solomon decorated the temple, he made it as if the decoration symbolized the whole of the creation – there are pictures of fruits, flowers, plants and even animals which reminds the viewers of the Garden of Eden where the space of humans, the space of animals and the space of God came together. The presence of Yahweh in the centre of the land is a gateway to heaven. It is as if the Lord of all the creation has made His dwelling on the earth and exercising His Lordship among His people in this land as a demonstration of what He has purposed for the whole creation. Therefore, the sacred space is the micro-cosmos, a prototype of the space which God wants to create in the whole world. This helps us to understand the visions of the prophets who looked for a day when the glory of Yahweh is revealed to all the nations and fills all the earth and the people come to the knowledge of Yahweh's glorious presence on earth as it is in heaven (Isa. 40:5; 60:1-3; 66:19; Ezek. 40-44; Hab. 2:14; Zech. 14:9).

The centrality of the sacred space is almost irresistible because it affects the whole of the social structures. It is not merely that the people of Israel are more attached to their land and their temple rather it is the presence of God that defines the people's dwelling in the land. In other words, it is not the social structure that defines the presence of God rather it is the presence of God that defines the social structure. Yahweh's rejection of the temple meant the rejection of the land. And because this is the land that is promised to them, if they overstep the instructions of their God and fill the land with sin and evil, they are no longer fit to live in this land and thus they are banished.

It is not that God most of the time lived in heaven, away from earth and occasionally visited the temple. The temple, by its definition, is God's resting place. It doesn't mean that He is limited to the boundaries of the temple for He is great even beyond the borders of Israel (Num. 14:31; Mal. 1:5). All the nations are His instruments. But the temple is a place where God is present on earth as in heaven. The presence of God in the temple and heaven is overlapping with each other. He does not require His people to meet His material requirements rather He wants

them to execute justice, be righteous and worship Him in reverence of His character (Mic. 6:8).

After the settlement of Israel in the Promised Land, and after the building of the temple in Jerusalem, the temple mount or Mount Zion is interpreted as the dwelling place of Yahweh. Just as the ancients believed that their gods would dwell on the high places, Israel believed that Mount Zion is the dwelling place of God. The uniqueness and splendour of the city of Jerusalem do not lie in its wealth and power but in its temple. It is from this place the presence of God radiates throughout the land and the kings who are ruling from here are the channels of bringing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Jerusalem or Zion was simply a rocky mountain but because of the presence of the Temple of Yahweh, the status of the city is exalted to another level. The theologians and the poets of ancient Israel interpreted Mount Zion as the holy mountain and the city as God's own city. It is here that Israel's God comes to life along with the realities of His people. It is here the nations witness the presence of the Lord who created heaven and the earth. For instance, look at these poets describing the city/mountain of God:

*God is in the midst of the city;  
it shall not be moved;  
God will help it when the morning dawns. (Ps. 46:5)*

*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised  
in the city of our God.  
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,  
is the joy of all the earth,  
Mount Zion, in the far north,  
the city of the great King. (Ps. 48:1-2)*

Or look at these songs of pilgrims who visit Jerusalem for their celebrations:

*The LORD bless you from Zion. (Ps. 128:5).  
May all who hate Zion  
be put to shame and turned backward. (Ps. 129:5)  
For the LORD has chosen Zion;  
he has desired it for his habitation:  
"This is my resting place forever;*



*here I will reside, for I have desired it. (Ps. 132:13-14)*

*May the LORD, maker of heaven and earth,  
bless you from Zion. (Ps. 134:3)*

*Blessed be the LORD from Zion,  
he who resides in Jerusalem. (Ps. 135:21)*

However, it was, sometimes, associated with the wrong ideology that the city and the temple can never be destroyed because it is the dwelling place of Yahweh. They thought that no other nation can do any attempt in annihilating the holy city. But the prophets vehemently criticized this view saying that the presence of God and, more precisely the very existence of Israel in the land, is defined by their actions and by the way they keep their covenant with their God. If the people break their partnership with God, He deliberately withdraws Himself from the Temple and from the land which leaves it exposed to foreign attacks.

The rest of this God, in this temple and on this mountain, is the demonstration of the Edenic life. The rest is undisturbed as long as people remain loyal to their God by observing His instructions. Every area of the society gets defined by Yahweh's presence in the land. Politics, sociology and human actions must keep the sanctity of the sacred space. When the people of Israel help the poor and needy among them, when they liberate the slaves, it doesn't mean that they are doing social work. It is not that they have to do it because God has asked them to do it. It is not even that by doing so they are increasing the number of their good works. It is nothing but rendering justice – setting things right. Moreover, it is the demonstration of what it means when God dwells among the people and what it means that God is in charge of the world.

### **3.4 GODS AND KINGS**

What we have looked at thus far is the vision of a nation and land which worships Yahweh and how it looks like when God dwells among His people and what it means for God's space to meet with human space. This vision is so beautiful, elite and equally dangerous. It is dangerous because it calls the people to leave out their own definitions of life and cultivate the life that honours God and society. It is dangerous because it challenges the people not to adopt any other religion or social structures so that in this nation the true life and Kingdom of God is manifested and

the nations witness the glory of Yahweh. The law codes were not supposed to bind the people with restrictions rather are supposed to help the people to live a life of true freedom and peace.

All this is okay. But was it practised really? Were all these parameters adopted by Israel? Well, the answer is both yes and no. But the *no* speaks louder than the yes. Let us look at the biblical narrative of Israel's history.

From the time on the Israelites had left Egypt and began their journey to the Promised Land, they began to test the *faithfulness* or *trustworthiness* of Yahweh. We know that the foundation of every partnership is trust and trustworthiness. Loss of trust is the beginning of the end of every partnership. From the time on they faced the Red Sea, they began to murmur against God. It was not that their God is incapable of doing the great things but the issue is *lack of trust in God's reliability*. They doubted whether their God is truly reliable to keep His promises. The peak of the narrative of distrust in God's reliability and loyalty appears to us in the narrative of Israel's journey in the Book of Numbers. Time and again, they failed to trust that Yahweh is truly reliable. And because of such distrust, they were handed over to the consequences of their own choices.

One of the first incidents, when the people have tried to break their partnership with God, is the incident of the Golden calf. No sooner than God issued commandments to the people, and no sooner than the institution of their partnership with God, they broke the first commandments first. On the mountain, Yahweh was instructing Moses to prepare a sacred space for Him so that He can dwell among His people. But at the same time, the people began to think of making a god for themselves and continue their journey following this god. While Yahweh was intending to manifest His glory among them, they began to make a different image to represent a different god. And thus God commanded Moses to leave the mountain and spoke that He would reject these people. All this we see in Exodus 32. However, God renews His covenant, listening to the intercession of Moses. In Exodus 34:6-7, He reveals His character saying that He is a God of *compassion* and *grace* who is *slow to anger* but overflowing with *loyal love* (*chesed* – covenant love, *steadfast love*, *faithful love*) and *faithfulness* (*trustworthiness*, *truthfulness*). I have italicized these characteristics of God because they are stated by God Himself – Yahweh's self-definition. Moreover, this is the essence of the character of God that we encounter throughout the Scriptures.

If we look closer to Exodus 32:1-6, we get a glimpse of the cultic practices and the moral state of people that are associated with the worship of pagan deities. Look at this:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD." They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

The last part of verse 6 says that they rose to revel. But this is not a simple celebration of joy and merry. CEV (Contemporary English Version) renders it as "... *they began to carry on like wild people*" and MSG (The Message) paraphrases it saying that "... *then began to party. It turned into a wild party!*" This shows why Yahweh forbade His people to worship other gods. He commanded them not even to make an idol to demonstrate His presence. Therefore, what happened in Exodus 32 is not merely a sin (not being up to the mark) but the violation and breaking off of their very partnership with Yahweh. Do not be surprised when Yahweh says that He would destroy these people because it does not demonstrate Yahweh was an angry god but His intense pain when the people are disloyal to Him and break their trust. What Israel deserves is rejection. But Yahweh relents to do so even though He cannot bear it.

This is just the beginning of the narrative of Israel's failure to keep her partnership with Yahweh. Much more comes to appear in the Deuteronomistic history of Israel or the early prophets of the Hebrew Bible (Joshua to Kings, save Ruth).

We must remember that the Israelites were chosen to be a priestly kingdom and holy nation of Yahweh. They are supposed to be an alternative society and a nation that is radically different though not

indifferent, from all the peoples around them. Also, remember that even the ancient mythologies made sense in those days. This sets the ground to understand why Yahweh was against any kind of worship of other gods. However, it was more convincing for ancient Israel to worship the other deities that are associated with the different forces and powers of nature than to be satisfied with one God because practically no others spoke of one God who is all-sufficient and all-powerful. Also, keep in mind that the ancients never concerned about the philosophical *truth* and it was very easy for them to believe any claim about any deity. It was in such a world that the Israelites were called to be *holy* – unique and consecrated and dedicated to Yahweh alone.

It is in this setting, we need to understand the conquest of the Promised Land. Yahweh commands Israel to eliminate all the people from the land before they settle there – including their cities, cattle and children. (I'm not into the discussion of complications of such a statement.) It reminds us of the flood narrative in the days of Noah where the great universal flood eliminates the entire humankind and the living creatures and when Noah steps on the dry land, it's all a new creation with new humanity and a new civilization. Similarly, when the people of Israel enter the land of Canaan, they have to eliminate everything that is already existing there and have to start a whole new life.

There are a couple of reasons for such action. Firstly, Yahweh uses Israel as an instrument to clean the land that has been defiled and polluted by these people. People of the land of Canaan were a mixed community without any specific ethnicity. A study about the Canaanite religion in ancient times shows how depraved society was both because of their actions and because of their cultic practices. The cult of Baal and Anat (or Asherah) was associated with temple prostitution. Other cultic practices included human sacrifices including the infants and children. Along with these, the land was polluted because of sexual immorality (including homosexuality and bestiality – sex with animals), the murder of the innocents, perverted justice, magic, socio-political oppression, etc. Therefore, in such a setting, the entry and settlement of Israel must sanctify the land so that it becomes God's own land and space where He can dwell with the people.

Secondly, it was to keep Israel unpolluted by the influence of paganism and pagan society. They are commissioned to eliminate the

peoples, not making a covenant with them so that they can be a nation that is holy and becomes a light to the nations by demonstrating what it means to be people of Yahweh and how that transforms the social structures and brings the Edenic life back to earth.

The Book of Joshua narrates how Israel began to occupy the land and settle in it by the means of military conquest. They attacked the cities and destroyed them. But that is not everything. They did not do it completely. By the end of the generation of Joshua, some other places were leftover without conquest. The opening chapters of the Book of Judges narrate that they even accommodated these people. The worst of the narrative is that they have rejected Yahweh and His vocation in honour of pagan peoples and their deities. Read Judges 2 for yourself and you will understand the scene. The nation that has newly entered into the land is no more *holy* (*set apart*) than the existing peoples. They went to the extreme of adopting the culture and religion of the people around them which was hated by Yahweh. Let me remind you again, worshipping other gods is not merely praying to them, rather it is getting associated with all the cultic practices that are connected to the particular deities. When we speak about Israel's worship of other gods, it is not that they have replaced Yahweh with other deities rather they were brought alongside Him because it was the mentality of the ancients to serve different gods for different needs instead of having a single and all-sufficient God. This adulterates the holy covenant that was between Yahweh and Israel.

The narrative says that they are handed over to the consequences of their actions. Yahweh delivered them to their neighbours who turned to be their enemies. This attitude of Yahweh comes not out of His furious indignation against the people rather out of sorrow that how they are proving themselves to be disloyal to Him. He has not burdened them with commandments to bring everything to meet His material requirements for He does not need them. He expected from the people was trust and loyalty to Him and Him alone because of which everything in the society would set right.

The character of Yahweh has been demonstrated in the times of His anger against the people. Anger is not the character of God. When the people had to experience shame and suffering as a consequence of their own decisions and actions, they turned to Yahweh and pleaded for forgiveness. Forgiveness meant deliverance from the enemies and

peaceful resettlement. This is where the character of God was expressed – He raised saviours for them who delivered people from the hands of their enemies and set the things right. This happens again and again. The cycle of sin, shame, supplication and salvation happens more frequently throughout the narrative of the Book of Judges. People failed Yahweh, they did not trust this God to satisfy their needs and set things right instead they went on to satisfy the needs of other gods to get their society well. But Yahweh was not disloyal to His covenant. He was slow to anger – it took a long time for Him to drive out people from the land.

The Book of Judges closes with the inter-tribal issues within Israel. We have seen how the first page of the Bible envisages human society. When God created human beings, he created them male and female and blessed them to multiply and fill the earth. When the human population increases, the families, tribes and nations come to the scene. But the picture of humankind is supposed to bear the image of God – be of one collective identity despite the racial and national diversity. We have also seen how this has been lost when the siblings become rivals and later the nations become enemies of each other. But this was not expected from Israel. When the land was divided among them, it was very appropriate and all of them were supposed to be one single nation of unity despite the tribal plurality. They are supposed to have one collective identity. This vision turns reverse. There are inter-tribal conflicts and even the ideology of the supremacy of one tribe over the others. Siblings turn to be rivals and murder one another.

Things became inevitable for the people of Israel that they approached Samuel to appoint a single leader over them so that things will be set right by him. They requested the centralized authority. There are both national and international reasons for this. But there is something wrong here. They request a king for them *just as other nations have one for each*. It was like, like the narrators of Samuel tell us, rejecting the kingship of Yahweh. Until now, the people of Israel desired other gods and goddesses just as other nations have for themselves. Not limiting themselves with the rejection of Yahweh from being their *One* God, now they began to reject Yahweh being King over them (1 Sam. 8:7-8).

They want a king who can go before them, to battle for them and rule over them. They need a king to meet their requirements. We need

to know the socio-religious context in which they have asked for a king. The religious condition was unstable in Israel – it was easy for them to betray Yahweh. If Yahweh was the king over them, they were uninterested in meeting the demands of this King because they could not consider Him as a trustworthy King who can rule over them. Instead, they are looking for a king whom they can trust thinking that if they could decide a trustworthy ruler for themselves.

Yahweh provided a king for them, although He is not pleased with that. King Saul, the first monarch over Israel has been declared. But the narrative shows how this king could neither show complete obedience to Yahweh nor was he completely fit for his position. He was rejected by Yahweh and now the people could not stand before the Philistines who were one of the main reasons for Israel to ask for a king so that they can be freed from their tyranny and threats.

But there is hope again. Yahweh Himself chooses a king for His people. He chooses a man after His own heart. By appointing Him as a king, Yahweh Himself, once again, becomes King over Israel. This is to say, in and through the kingship of David, Yahweh claims the nation back to Himself. He sends the prophet to anoint him and bestows His Spirit so that his reign in the future demonstrates God's kingdom. David was a shepherd by profession and he was appointed, now, as a shepherd over Israel. He will be the one who follows God's heart to lead God's people on the right path.

David's anointing happens under the nose of King Saul – God appoints another king even when a king is already running the show. This God-appointed king goes on to deliver Israel from the enemies. God's trustworthiness is demonstrated in and through David's defeat of the enemies when the king whom the people have desired is exposed to be incapable to save his people. David's defeat of Goliath is Yahweh's way of expressing His trustworthiness in liberating His people when they have rejected Him, at least, considering Him as not trustworthy enough to solve their problems and save them from the enemies. Somehow, Yahweh becomes the in-charge of Israel in and through David.

After David has captured Jerusalem and makes it the centre of Israel's state, God makes a covenant with David and promises that He would establish his kingdom forever. David's successors would act as Yahweh's son. (The concept of the son of God in the context of the

Hebrew Bible, therefore, is a Davidic king – the anointed one.) He was also promised that his throne stands forever. However, David's reign over Israel was not so peaceful. His kingship was frequently threatened. But by the end, David is the king and he dies only after announcing his successor.

Solomon comes to the scene. He was *the* wisest of all the kings of Israel. His name is famous for the temple he had built for Yahweh. He also built a magnificent palace and strengthened the city. But then things turn dark. Eventually, Solomon becomes a tyrant king just as the Pharaoh of Exodus. He established a strong economic system. There was no single battle taken place in his reign. But the strategies of kingship were not in line with the instructions of Yahweh. He enslaves many of the people and appoints leaders over these slave labourers. People feel oppressed and weary because of his long and authoritarian reign. People began to seek freedom. Apart from this, he married several pagan women which were forbidden by Yahweh. It was not because Israel was a supreme race but it was to keep them being seduced to go after other deities. Solomon's heart turns away from Yahweh. He was warned through prophetic oracles but nothing was set right.

The result of this socio-religious condition was that the majority of the kingdom was taken away from him and given to his rival. When people found no solution for their slave labour from the son of Solomon, the whole nation except for Judahites and Benjaminites, appointed a king over themselves – Jeroboam – leaving the nation of Israel split into two independent and rival kingdoms. Things get worse gradually. The Northern King, Jeroboam, installs idols in his kingdom so that the people of his kingdom do not get attracted to the Jerusalem temple. Dynasties change in the Northern kingdom but things get worsened time after time. King Ahab of the Omri Dynasty officialised the cult of Baal in Israel and because of which the people reject Yahweh's sovereignty altogether preferring the gods of other nations. Finally, the Northern Kingdom falls to the Assyrian Empire, leaving it extinct in antiquity and never restored.

Although the Southern Kingdom of Judah repeats the same things of its sister-nation, some righteous kings tried to revive and reform the nation so that it could remain loyal to Yahweh. The prominent examples of those who revived and reformed the state and the religion was King Hezekiah and King Josiah. People repented and returned to Yahweh under these kings. The nationwide revival took place. However, sadly,



these reforms did not last so long. They disappeared no sooner than they began to transform society.

If you notice the narrative of the kings of Judah, all the kings and their reign was evaluated at least based on three factors. Firstly, whether the king was keeping Yahweh's covenantal law. Secondly, whether this king followed the model of David. Thirdly, whether this king has made any attempts to reform the people and the land. All these were criteria of the biblical narrators to evaluate the reign of any king. It was not merely evaluated, as modern history, based on achievements, battles and contribution. This is to say that the theology of monarchy in Israel was so powerful. The biblical writers saw the kings as autonomous authoritarians who have all the rights to do whatever they like. Unlike the other ancient people, the kings of Israel were never elevated nor equated to the position of gods. These kings, according to the Bible, do not act on their own terms rather they are instruments of God to demonstrate His rule on earth as it is in heaven.

Till now, we have looked at how far the nation of Israel tried to be loyal to its God, Yahweh. Although there are times when the nation was restored to loyalty to Yahweh and His covenant, there are more times when they rejected Yahweh and His vocation for the sake of *gods* and *kings*. In the next section, we would see how their gods and kings affected the social realities and how all this long narrative came to a tragic end.

### 3.5 THE GRAND DIVORCE

Let's begin with the understanding of the relationship between the kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of God. The fundamental faith of Israel was that Yahweh, their God, was the Lord of all the world. They knew that the reign of their God extends throughout the cosmos. The basic understanding is that Yahweh is the sovereign Lord and He controls the kingdoms of all the nations. At the same time, the Kingdom of God was also understood in relation to Israel. They are special people who are directly under the reign of Yahweh. They understood God's Kingdom not only as cosmic in general but also as a nation in particular. In other words, the Kingdom of God becomes a concrete reality in and through their nation. The people, as a whole, serve as a channel to the nations in demonstrating the direct reign of Yahweh. They ought to show the way how it looks when God is the King.

Based on this idea, the kingship of Yahweh can be rejected by the people when they turn to their own decisions of life. Although they cannot affect the sovereignty of God by any means, they can reject Him as their true Lord. This is why God said to Samuel that when Israel asked for a king, they have rejected Him from being king over them (1 Sam. 8:7). This was serious because God chose Israel to be His *Kingdom* of priests. Yet, in the latter times, Yahweh once again became King over Israel but through the king, He has appointed over Israel. When these God-appointed kings stay loyal to God, they become channels of God's Kingdom.

Now let us begin with Solomon and look at how the kings of Israel began to become the tyrant lords who are no longer the representatives of the Kingdom of God. As the history of Israel continued to progress, they began to achieve great socio-economic and political advancements that drastically affected their social structures. Keep in mind that any change in the political and social system of Israel would be rejecting the vocation of Yahweh, their God and their King. Even if the society develops and adopts different social structures, the ethics of the society must remain the same as it was defined by Yahweh when He made a partnership with Israel at Sinai.

We have seen that very few of the kings were truly loyal to Yahweh by worshipping Him alone and carrying out His vocation. When kings failed in being loyal to Yahweh, things got dramatically reversed from God's vision of the society. When kings encouraged the worship of other gods, society became degraded in its morality and spirituality. Again and again, the kings and the people of Israel failed to keep their partnership with Yahweh. They failed to *trust* their partner. They turned their back at Him. This resulted in the perversion of society in different ways.

The rich in society began to focus on their pleasures and positions. They began to acquire more than what was needed to them, but often this happened at the cost of crushing the poor. The poor in the society had become vulnerable victims of the greed and selfishness of the rich and tyrant lords. The priesthood of the temple was corrupted. There was no one to do justice – set the things right and restore the declined ones to their positions. To speak in contemporary language, basic human rights were neglected. Peasants and oppressed in the society felt more insecure, unheard, unconcerned by the rest of the society. Majoritarian society began to look down on the minorities. In other words, the tyranny of the

Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus is echoing once again here. The worst is that this happens among the people *who are called by God's name*.

Reading of the early prophetic texts such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah depict the worsened state of Israelite religion and society. While, on the one hand, the injustice and violence prevailed in the Israelite society, they come to Yahweh's temple, on the other hand, and bless the name of the Lord and offer the sacrifices to Him. They sing songs, celebrate festivals and bring wealthy offerings to Yahweh. But this is something ridiculous. While they come and worship Yahweh in the temple, they go out and tread over His people. They render something opposite of what their God has required from them. God looked for justice in the society but saw bloodshed – the blood of the innocent victims flowing throughout the city. The minorities of the society become prey for the greedy majoritarian rich monsters. God looked for righteousness but heard the outcries of the oppressed (Isa. 5:1-7).

Prophets vehemently criticized the hypocrite religion of Israel. They stood against the disloyalty to Yahweh's covenant. They proclaimed against kings and citizens alike. The worst thing that had ever happened is, their mouths were shut by the powerful ones. Almost nobody in the society wished to pay attention to the cries of these charismatic people who spoke on behalf of a God and a King whom they have rejected. They became victims of the same realities against which they stood. Religion and society had become so rusted and useless, at least useless to God. The partner who supposed to share in the vocation and blessings of God became an *unfaithful* partner. When Israel's prophets used different symbolic imageries to communicate their message, they were not reluctant to compare Israel to an unfaithful wife and even to a *prostitute*! They rejected Yahweh and His vocation. They are no in a mood to repair their relationship.

Yahweh was slow, very slow to anger. He was so patient with these people. Rejection of Him being their God and rejection of His kingship had become so inevitable yet He gave them many chances to repent – to return to their partnership and join with Him in bringing life to the dead world. Every time they were corrected, they became worse than before. We cannot comprehend the faithfulness and loyalty to the people.

Apart from this, Israelites had a falsified theology of assurance that their land and their temple will never be destroyed. If Yahweh was the

One True Sovereign Lord over all the world and if He were the Greatest of all other deities, the people and the land with whom He has associated Himself cannot be attacked and be put down. However, the Hebrew prophets were against this. The connection between the people, land and God is not merely based on Yahweh's sovereignty but the people's partnership with and loyalty to Him.

But there came a final day when the people of Jerusalem and Judah became captives of the Babylonian Empire. The kingdom of Judah finally came to its conclusion – a shameful conclusion. The temple was destroyed and burnt. The enemies broke into the city walls and began to act ruthlessly. Many became the prey of the fury of Nebuchadnezzar's army. This is something that the majoritarian and selfish society had never imagined even in its wildest dreams.

We have seen that the ancients polluted/destroyed the sacred space when they defeated a people to claim victory over the deities of the defeated ones. But the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, according to biblical writers, was not because Babylonian gods were more powerful than Yahweh but because Yahweh, out of His will, has withdrawn Himself from the temple and allowed it to be destroyed. The withdrawal of Yahweh from the temple left the land and the people exposed to the attacks by the enemy nations.

There are at least three different angles to understand the Babylonian exile of Israel. Firstly, God handed them to the consequences of their own actions and choices. Let's think politically. After the death of Josiah the king of Judah, the Babylonian Empire which was vassal of the Assyrian Empire till now had begun to gain power in ancient West Asia. In a very less period of time, the Babylonian Empire became the supreme political power. As the Babylonian power began to expand westward, the kingdom of Judah became a vassal of Babylon. Later, Nebuchadnezzar, the powerful king of Babylon, installed a vassal king in Jerusalem by removing the existing king because of his rebellion against the power of Babylon. King Zedekiah was appointed over Judah. By now, the citizens of the kingdom of Judah had already tasted what it means to revolt against Babylon since it was the superpower. However, once again the people of Jerusalem tried to revolt against Babylon even with the support of Egypt. Yahweh, through His prophet Jeremiah, had warned them not to rebel but to obey. When Jeremiah said this, he was considered *anti-nationalist* and

a *conspirator*. The situations raged the fury of Nebuchadnezzar which resulted in the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. In this sense, the Babylonian exile was the consequence of their own choices.

Moreover, the people were also arrogant to listen to any voice that tried to correct them. They behaved like blind and deaf who could neither see nor hear their God. They chose to continue their worship of other gods and continued to break the commandments of Yahweh. They loved to enjoy themselves at the cost of other's lives. They loved to satisfy their desires for power, wealth and sex. They loved violence and injustice. The result is that they became victims of the consequences of their own choices.

The second dimension is that Yahweh turned His face away from the people when they were being defeated by their enemies. This is not to say that Yahweh was an angry god just like any other gods, rather we need to see His pain. Often we fail to recognize the emotions of God even when they are described in human terms. Look at these people who were chosen by God, liberated by Him and trained to be His perfect partner. He made them lack nothing. He blessed them with His very presence. But again and again, they chose to make their decisions. They were not as loyal as their God. They invited other gods into this land – into this home. Let me say this: when Israel brought other gods into their land and worshipped them alongside Yahweh, it was like a person bringing other men/women into the house and engaging in sexual intercourse with them right in front of his/her loving partner (husband/wife).

I know I'm not exaggerating the point because the covenantal partnership between Yahweh and Israel was much like a partnership between a husband and wife. But most of the time, Israel was not loyal to their God. If they were loyal, they would not have invited the gods of their nations. Moreover, this is not merely a religious problem but a religious problem that affected society too. Failing to keep the covenant with Yahweh resulted in the society of broken relationships, greed, murder, immorality, sexual impurity, etc. Many times Yahweh tried to speak to the people but their hearts had become much harder than Pharaoh of Exodus. They closed their ears to hear the outcries for justice and peace in the nation. They closed their eyes to look at how society had become. Therefore, finally, Yahweh turns His face away from this loyal partner out of His intense pain. He closes His eyes when the nation is being plundered

and destroyed. But this also pierced His heart. The same people who had put their God to shame before the other nations now are put to shame.

Thirdly, the exile was driving out people from the land. When Adam and his wife were proven to be incapable of keeping and cultivating the Garden of Eden in the terms of the Gardener, they were driven out of it. Similarly, when the people of the land – Israel – were incapable of keeping the standards of their God who graciously granted this land to them, they were driven out from it. While God wanted to bring the Edenic life in and through His people in His land, people disrespected their vocation. They despised God. Now, they are no longer fit to be in this land.

Let us also remember the incident of the Noahic flood. The entire earth was wiped out by God by a great cosmic flood so that the land and the whole creation can be renewed and become an inhabitable place both for God and the people. Similarly, the land was wiped off by the flood of the Babylonian army so that it can be cleansed and new people could be installed in it with a new vocation. The same God who used Israel, in the days of Joshua, as an instrument to sanctify the land, now used Israel's enemies as an instrument for the same purpose.

Exile was one of the greatest horrors in the history of Israel. They lost their homeland. They are ripped of their majesty and dignity in their world. This was like divorcing the partner on a stage in public. The people who were supposed to bring heaven on earth by partnering with their God have finally been rejected just as the nations were rejected at the incident of Babel. Moreover, the family that was called out of Babel (Babylon/Chaldea) now ended up in the same state.

This incident gives rise to many questions. Is this the end of the story? Does God ever find any other faithful partner who can partner with Him in bringing heaven and earth together? Will there ever be a renewal of Yahweh's covenant with Israel? Will there ever be a king who demonstrates God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? Leave all of that and answer this, will there ever be a society that truly corresponds to the vision of God in the Bible? Will heaven and earth come together once again? Let's try to answer these questions in the upcoming chapters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# REVOLUTIONARY VOICES

The clock is one of the greatest inventions of human beings. It serves different purposes. It helps us to know the time and set our actions according to it. One of the primary purposes of the clock is to alarm people. These alarms serve to awaken us from sleep. Moreover, in today's generation, we have them in our hands. We set alarms in our mobile phones for different purposes other than for waking up in the morning. These alarms remind us of our tasks, our events and engagements, special days, and also deadlines for our projects. Just imagine how it would be like when people have alarms but simply ignore them. What if people consider alarms as disturbing? When I say alarms I remember of bells in schools and colleges around which everything is centred. The bells announce an end to something and a beginning of something new. These bells are both a piece of good news and a piece of bad news to the students on the campuses. It is inevitable for everyone to set the day according to the bells and alarms. Just imagine how it would be like when there is no bell at all on the campus? Otherwise, there is a bell and everyone simply ignores it.

I remember my days on the campus of our Seminary. Each week, a student is assigned to ringing bells, both in the hostel and in the academic

block. Students would prefer other duties than the bell duty. One who rings the bell is the centre of tension in the student community. He is both the most irritating and also most loving. Ringing the bell at 5 am every morning is a tiresome task. This is one of the most hated bell sounds – the bell in the early morning. There are some times when the assigned student forgets to ring the bell on time and that causes several problems. During the class hours and duty hours, the bell is the most melodious sound for everyone because it ends the tiresome study and other duties. Students just take a sigh of relief when the bell rings, at the right time and for the right purpose. This is something funny and also serious. Bell ringers on our campus are the most vigilant people. They are also the best time-keepers and watchers. And it's just unimaginable to think of the campus without a bell and a bell-ringer. Although it reminds us of the moment of action, it is also the most hated sound. Sometimes the same bell is a gospel for the students who feel oppressed and depressed because of long hours of study and work. At other times the same bell is the *bad news* for those who are peaceful and free because it marks an end to their time of *freedom*.

Likewise, the Hebrew prophets played a very crucial role in the religion and society of ancient Israel. They were not so powerful and welcomed people in their day. They were just a part of a minority and represented the theology of minority peoples in their times. There were, indeed, the royal prophets who were popular in the cities and courts. However, by the time of the 8th century BC, these *prophetic circles* were corrupted too. Instead of communicating the messages from Yahweh, they began to minister for their own needs and satisfaction. It was in this time, whom we call the prophets in the Old Testament (Amos, Micah, Hosea, Elijah, etc.) were chosen from outside of the existing prophetic circles because it was them who were available for Yahweh to speak to the people His messages.

The prophets served as alarms to the people to remind them of the forgotten covenant. Again and again, they showed up on the scene to restore people to their partnership with Yahweh. However, just as the bells in the campuses, their voices served as a piece of good news for those who are oppressed and depressed under the tyrannical domination of the majoritarian society. At the same time, their voices were a piece of bad news to the majoritarian people who are self-satisfied and peaceful despite their actions of immorality and cruelty. The messages of these prophets



were so revolutionary and thought-provoking. They did not speak in chaos but they spoke the message from Yahweh at risk of their own lives. In this chapter, we would have a brief journey through these revolutionary voices that appear to us in times of negativity and hopelessness.

#### 4.1 HANGING BETWEEN TRADITION AND HOPE

As said earlier, Hebrew prophets comprised a minority of the Israelite society. Before understanding the mission of the prophets, let us understand what it means to be a prophet. In today's Christian world, the words *prophet* and *prophecy* are associated with meanings like *a foretelling of the future*. But this is not the fundamental meaning of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible. The word *prophecy* simply means to speak on someone's behalf. It is like a herald going out in the streets and announcing the words of a king. Or it is like a lawyer speaking on the behalf of the victim in the judicial court. Therefore, a prophet is a messenger who communicates the message of God or is someone who speaks on behalf of God. Though there is an element of the future in their messages, it is different from how we understand it today. Now, for a while, let us just look at who were the prophets and how they communicated the message of God.

We need to understand the setting first. It is a majoritarian society that has no room for traditions nor a room for hope. By traditions in the Israelite society, I refer to the narratives of the past that speak about the exodus from Egypt, Yahweh's covenant with Israel, the instructions laid down by Yahweh and the vocation of Israel. There is no value in society for those who keep these traditions of faith. The majority of the society including the monarchs, priests, rich and powerful ones, had already kept aside their covenant with Yahweh. The sanctity of life and their identity as Yahweh's covenant people is no longer remembered in society.

This gave rise to several serious issues which we have briefly surveyed in the previous chapter. The minorities of the society are oppressed and the outcry for justice and peace heard everywhere. The vision of Yahweh for His people is no longer a practised reality. With their gods and kings, the people have set up themselves against their traditions, against their people and their God. The *Grand National Narrative* of Israel was a narrative that promised good days and successful days for the majoritarian society that ignored the presence of Yahweh in their nation. They imagined a future where everyone is satisfied in the riches of his/

her own earning even at the cost of the lives of the innocent poor. They imagined a future where no one ever cries out against them and no one ever stands against them. What they did was bringing peace in the society by suppressing all those voices that exposed the wretchedness of the people and called out for justice. One day, they imagined that their nation would stand in the highest place among all other nations. The worst of their imagination was that Yahweh, their God, is *for* them.

In such a setting, where the voices of the minority were suppressed and rejected and in a society where there is no room for the traditions, the Hebrew prophets rose as *alarms* in the society to protest against the majoritarian narrative of the nation that had rejected the covenant with Yahweh. They began to see the world differently from the vision of a normal eye. They saw the things through the lens of God, through the lens of His covenant with people. When they saw it, they understood that what was taking place in their religion and society was not something *normal* and *natural*. Everything has become *unnatural* because it was against the *naturality* that Yahweh wanted to see in this nation. Everything is working together in society to *disturb the goodness of God's land*. There is no longer order and perfection among the people who are called by God's name. Because they have rejected Yahweh's covenant and because of their *gods* and *kings*, the nation has become defiled – wild and waste, uninhabitable and purposeless, void and nothing. And the worst is that no one can observe these realities – how chaotic and dark the things are turning out. Practically, it seemed that this majoritarian society would, one day, become the superpower in the nation lynching the lives of the vulnerable ones in the society and betraying Yahweh for other gods.

Therefore, because they adhered to the traditions, they began to envision an alternative world that is against the grand narrative of the nation. They envisaged a society where nobody is afraid of anyone in society and there is justice and peace established in the land. They began to risk their lives in acting for making their vision a reality. This is to say, they looked at society with the eyes of their God. They paid attention to the words of Yahweh that echoed in their ears but were not heard by the society that was deaf because of its arrogance of power and wealth. They boldly proclaimed *thus says the Lord* claiming to be his mouth-pieces. They were not robots who just heard the message of God and communicated the same *dictated words*. God put His word in their mouth and thus when these prophets conveyed their message it was the communication of the

very heart of God. They saw the visions of God for the transformation of the society that was not visible to the eyes that became blind because of their own ideologies to build up the society.

We also need to understand that these prophets heard the voices of the minorities that are silenced by the powerful ones in society. While people paid attention to the voices of the rich and majestic ones in society, these prophets heard the outcry of the oppressed in the streets of the cities and the corners of the country-side. They were able to hear the voice of God speaking in and through realities. The voice that has been suppressed and unheard by society has become the message of the prophets. Not only they spoke on behalf of God in a supernatural sense but they also spoke on behalf of the silenced voices of the society on whose side God takes. When the prophets understood, from their traditions, that Yahweh takes the side of the suppressed, silenced and insecure powerless ones in the society, they began to speak on their behalf criticizing and indicting the society for its depraved desires.

The Hebrew prophets accused Israel of choosing the deities of other nations that perverted not only their allegiance to Yahweh but also corrupted the social structures because of their allegiance to pagan deities. Their worship of Yahweh had become just a routine life, as a ritual ceremony. The leaders of Israel - both political and religious - and their gods disturbed the *normality* and *naturality* of the society by redefining the place of power, wealth and pleasure.

Therefore, when prophets served as alarms for the people to remind them of the forgotten covenant, forgotten vocation and forgotten traditions, these alarm sounds were most irritating to the majority of the people. Moreover, the visions for the future were against the popular culture and popular national narrative. To be precise, the prophetic messages were not merely predicting the future which has nothing to do with the past and the present. All of the visions and messages of the prophets had something to do with the present. They are the prospects for the future of the nation for which the actions in the present set the path. It is the consequences of the people's choice which the prophets displayed as the reality of their future. The hope for the future is strongly grounded in the society that is envisaged by the covenantal principles of Yahweh. Thus, the future element of the prophecy was based on God's trustworthiness

and the people's choices in the past and the present.

When the prophets urged the people to render justice to the poor and vulnerable in society, they were not simply calling the people for some social actions such as doing some good works in society. It was not a mere call for some kind of *philanthropy* because it was not at all about charity and good deeds. What they were trying to do was exposing society to show how far it had gone away from Yahweh. It demonstrated how they have become a threat to the sacred space in their land. It was a call to set things right, to restore the broken relationships in society and to become a people that truly share in God's vision and vocation. It is a call to demonstrate a life to show what it means to be the people of Yahweh and how being His people affect the social structures. It was not a mere call for liberation but the redefinition of the society in the light of their partnership with Yahweh.

Thus, the prophets were hanging between the tradition and their prophetic vision. They gave hope to the minority who remained loyal to Yahweh and being oppressed and crushed down by society. They reminded the suffering ones of the event of exodus and reoriented their hope in God who never makes a covenant with pharaohs in the society but overthrows them to set the captives free who happened to live in the shadows of death. They not only gave hope for the future that God would deliver them but also engaged themselves in bringing that to reality. They envisioned a new heaven and a new earth where everything that Yahweh has purposed for the people would become a reality. But these prophets did not consider themselves as mere spectators of the *hope* but called people to act together to make that hope a reality.

However, the prophetic imaginations of these minorities were soon suppressed by the popular culture. These prophets became the victims of the same *beastliness* against which they had spoken. They were soon forgotten until their visions became a reality when God finally came down to overthrow the pharaohs of Israel and liberated the very poor of the society from the hands of their enemies. The prophetic mission served as a bridge between the traditions that defined the identity and vocation of Israel and the hope that envisioned a life that corresponds to the traditions.

## 4.2 WISDOM CALLS

It is simply unavoidable for us to think of the poetical and the wisdom traditions of Israel. The poetical compositions of ancient Israel renovate the faith and hope of the people through the prayers and lament of the lyricists with which the readers can identify themselves. They are part of the prayer of Israel. Along with this, they call the people to explore the majesty of Yahweh in His functions and invite them to praise Him. They are dense with emotional tones that are more practical. At the same time, along with the psalms, the wisdom traditions simplify the instructions of Yahweh and help the people to think and apply them in more practical terms. For our discussion here, we just have a brief understanding of the wisdom traditions of Israel.

Proverbs 1-9 is a large poetic composition introducing the Wisdom Literature as a whole and the Book of Proverbs in particular. This section, whether composed by Solomon himself or by editors who brought this book to its final form, calls the readers to come and receive the wisdom. The wisdom here is not merely about head-knowledge rather it is all about skills and arts, skills about how to live in God's world in God's way. Several synonyms for wisdom are used here such as insight, understanding, prudence, wise dealing, knowledge, learning and proverb which all speak about different dimensions of wisdom.

We have in this section the wisdom (personified as a woman) crying aloud in the streets, in market squares and at highest places of the city, calling people to listen to her so that they may lead their life in righteousness, justice and equity which ultimately result in blessings and prosperity. The value of wisdom is worth more than any treasure for it is rare to be found and happy is the one who finds it and follows it. In the Hebrew wisdom traditions, one cannot divide the wisdom and theology because it firmly states again and again that wisdom has its beginning only from the *fear of the Lord*. The fear is not about terror rather the reverence to God out of a pure heart. Proverbs 1-9 also provides instructions to the child just as a father does. These instructions exhort the readers not to ignore the words of Lady Wisdom so that they cannot fall from an upright life. They contain the warnings not to join with fools (those who ignore the instructions of the Wisdom), not to go after the folly of lust and adultery instead learn to live wisely that pleases the Lord by listening to the Lady Wisdom whose origin is from God.

A wise life is what God is expecting from each of His people. This wisdom is not merely about having knowledge of some things and expanding the horizons of intelligence. It is a call to revere and honour God which is the beginning of wisdom. Following this heavenly wisdom brings light and life into all the areas of one's individual and social life. The summary of wise living is to practice righteousness, justice, mercy and equity which is the summary of all the commandments of God related to social life. Failure to embrace wisdom is nothing other than failure to keep the commandments of the Lord because living in the light of wisdom is to live in loyalty to God in His world, in His ways. Godly wisdom is always pure and righteous. It teaches us the ways we need to live and present before God and the people.

Living wisely is a requirement. However, it is also a choice. Choosing to live wisely is nothing more than choosing life itself. The wisdom of God is something that keeps people from falling into the trap of falsified and temporary happiness of foolishness. In very simplistic words, Choosing Wisdom is to live in God's world in God's ways by God's definitions of good and evil which would result in enjoying the transforming life of God. On the other hand, foolishness is to ignore God's definition of good and evil and define them by ourselves for the sake of happiness that is not only temporary but also a falsified joy because its end is death and destruction.

The foolishness of this world can be seen in its definition of power – plotting, plundering, killing and subjugating the people for the sake of gaining riches and authority. Foolishness is evident in its definition of luxury – embracing lustful life by rejecting God's law of morality. But these all finally end up in destruction. In contrast to this, wisdom may seem harsh in its ways and instructions but it leads to a life that pleases God, a life that brings eternal peace and joy. When we truly honour God, we will surely follow His definitions of good and evil which is the wise living that relies not on the self-defined standards rather trusting and depending on the Lord with a whole heart.

To acquire wisdom is to learn the skills of life that transform society. While humanity rests itself in defining everything on its own terms and neglects how it is called to live, the wisdom calls the people to redefine their lives according to the precepts of God. Humans are free to choose any way of life. But they also need to be aware of the consequences that

are caused by their thoughts, words and actions. If everyone in society could truly practice this wisdom in his/her life, the world would become a better place. It brings heavenly life on earth. It makes the world the place which God intended to see. It corresponds to Yahweh's vision for His people to become an alternative society that stands as a signpost to Yahweh's dominion and His immense presence that fills all the cosmos.

### 4.3 REMARRYING THE UNFAITHFUL PARTNER

In the previous chapter, we discussed the Babylonian captivity of Jews as an account of a Grand Divorce between Yahweh and Israel. We have seen how He hands over the people to the consequences of their own choices and turns His face away from them. The people are driven out of the land that was given to them. They lost the homeland and the temple. Destruction of the temple, in ancient times, meant the beginning of the extinction of the history of deity and of the people who are associated with that time because the sacred space was the heart of the definition of the social structures in the ancient world. The exiles would generally trade their deity for the sake of the deities that are associated with the people who are superior to them. They would consider their gods as defeated by the king who had exiled them and therefore they ought to worship the gods of the nations where they have scattered.

At the same time, the captives would no longer keep their identity as separate people instead assimilate themselves into the culture of the peoples wherever they were scattered by the means of cross-cultural marriages. Implicitly, this happens together with the choice to worship other gods. This is how the religious and cultural traditions of the ancient world had disappeared in antiquity without any trace.

Even this happened in the case of many of the Jewish exiles. While some of them began to doubt the *trustworthiness* of their God in the setting of exile and destruction of the temple, some others betrayed Yahweh for the sake of other gods thinking that the gods of Babylon are powerful than Yahweh. When you read the opening pages of the Book of Daniel, you would have a glimpse of the life of Jews in exile. When the king offered his royal food and the pagan education to the Jewish young men, it was only four of them who resisted it out of their loyalty to Yahweh. When King Nebuchadnezzar erected a statue of himself and demanded emperor-worship to test their allegiance to the Empire, it was

only three of them who resisted it at the risk of their lives. This is to say, except for a minority of the people who remained loyal to their God without worshipping other gods nor assimilating their identity with the pagan people, most of them did the same that other nations would do.

This minority of people is termed by the biblical writers as a remnant. The exile brought so much hopelessness to them. They thought that it was the beginning of the end of their religion, their faith, and the history of their God. It was like Yahweh had been defeated. The exile came with great tension, pain, heartbreak, and guilt haunting them day and night. It is to these the hope was announced against the settings of the darkness and chaos that people are going through in the Babylonian exile. The remnant was promised that after some decades, they would return to their homeland and would worship their God in the temple once again. However, the promise of hope extended beyond the return from exile. It was a promise of a whole new beginning – a fresh start with fresh life in the renewed nation. It was a promise of a new creation, a new covenant, a new heart, and the bestowal of the very spirit of God upon every individual. Let us go through these themes that are very dense with theology and hope.

Let us begin with the so-called Jeremiah's *Book of Consolation* (chapters 29-33) where we get the first instance of a new creation and a new covenant. Because of people's sin (*khata* - not being up to the mark/moral failure), iniquity (*Avon* - steeped with crooked choices), and transgression (*pesha* - breaking the trust), their land has been invaded by the enemy nations and thus leaving the land wild and waste. The inhabitants are driven out of their homeland and their shelters have been destroyed. We have seen how biblical writers portray this as the *final judgement* of God's people for being disloyal to the covenant. It is a broken partnership between Yahweh and the people. It was in such a setting, Jeremiah comes with a hopeful message that Yahweh would bring people back to the nation, establish them in it, and turn the wilderness and desert-like land into a whole new and beautiful inhabited place. It is not only a hope of return but the hope of restoration of their partnership with Yahweh – a new covenantal relationship.

Today's Christians commonly understand the new covenant (testament) as a replacement of the Old covenant in Jesus Christ and that the new covenant is the covenant of grace and faith while the old one is



the covenant of Mosaic law. Although this is the popular understanding, the hope for the *new covenant* is much greater and deeper than our imagination. The need for the new covenant is not because that the old has outdated and it is a time to make a new partnership instead it is because the old has been broken and there is a need for new.

To think of the essence of the new covenant or a renewed partnership, just think of a married couple whose relationship has ended up in divorce. Suppose one of them was so unfaithful to the other spouse (just see the beginning of the previous chapter to understand the seriousness of this). This is the reason why they have been divorced and the unfaithful one has been driven out of the house and been put to shame in the public. Now, suppose that the unfaithful partner has realised the mistakes s/he has committed and deeply desiring for forgiveness. In this sense, forgiveness simply refers to the restoration of the broken relationship and acceptance into the home. Generally, this is something unusual to our imaginations. The partner who has been hurt a lot because of several chances offered for the change in the unfaithful one *must* have a very radical and different kind of heart to accept the unfaithful one and start a whole new relationship. Suppose, the loyal one shows great compassion and grace to the unfaithful one in the times of his/her shame and brings him/her back to the bosom for a fresh start instead of choosing another partner. This *loyal love* transforms the person into a wholly new being and the broken partnership is reunited and becomes stronger than before because of the renewed heart that never again attempts to hurt the other one anymore.

This is the picture of the understanding of the new covenant by the prophets. While Israel has been put to shame in the sight of the pagan nations and having no hope of their restoration back to their land and their God because of their excess transgressions, Yahweh shows compassion to these people in shame because of the consequences of their own choices (bearing the iniquity). The character of God – compassion, grace, patience, loyal love, and faithfulness – becomes demonstrated once again in the times of pain of Babylonian exile. They are once again assured of a return and restoration of their partnership with God and with one another. This is the hope for a fresh beginning.

Consider these instances: Hosea remarrying his unfaithful wife bringing her back to his home and demonstrating his life as a symbol of

Yahweh's own redeeming loyal love towards unfaithful Israel (Hosea 3); or consider Isaiah's comfort to the exiled people and assuring that they would return to their homeland and will be reunited with Yahweh once again. Or look at these excerpts from different prophetic texts:

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God.  
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her  
that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins. (Isa. 40:1-2)*

*Thus says the LORD:  
Where is your mother's bill of divorce with which I put her away?  
Or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you?  
No, because of your sins you were sold,  
and for your transgressions your mother was put away. (Isa. 50:1)*

*For the LORD will comfort Zion;  
he will comfort all her waste places,  
and will make her wilderness like Eden,  
her desert like the garden of the LORD;  
joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the voice of song. (Isa. 51:3)*

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken,  
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate;  
but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,  
and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you,  
and your land shall be married.*

*For as a young man marries a young woman,  
so shall your builder marry you,  
and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,  
so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:4-5)*

*Thus says the LORD:  
The people who survived the sword  
found grace in the wilderness;  
when Israel sought for rest,  
the LORD appeared to him from far away. I  
have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you...*

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt — a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jer. 31:2-3; 31-34)*

*Yes, thus says the Lord GOD: I will deal with you as you have done, you who have despised the oath, breaking the covenant; yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. Then you will remember your ways, and be ashamed when I take your sisters, both your elder and your younger, and give them to you as daughters, but not on account of my covenant with you. I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, in order that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD. (Ezek. 16:59-63)*

These are just some glimpses of the promise of the renewal of the broken covenant in the prophetic oracles celebrating God's loyal love (*chesed*) in the times of Israel's failure and abandonment. I suggest you read the whole bunch of prophetic texts for yourself and see how densely the hopeful imagination builds up. The prophets envisage a day when a new heart is given to the people – a heart that never turns hard and becomes unfaithful to Yahweh – because of which they will be transformed into a whole new being. It is a heart that is transformed by the forgiveness of people's sins, iniquities, and transgressions and flooded with the loyal and generous love of God. Yahweh demonstrates His faithfulness (*emeth*) to the people who truly repent of their choices and actions.

The prophets like Ezekiel and Joel look forward to a time when Yahweh bestows His Spirit to every one of His people – even to every single human being. God pouring out His Spirit upon the people must not be understood as a mere power to perform the supernatural things but must be seen as the very presence of God dwelling within every

human being. This is to say, the same glorious presence of God that fills the whole universe also fills every individual of humankind that radically transforms their lives and makes them *living and walking sacred space*. In other words, when the Spirit of God is poured upon all the flesh, humanity becomes a sacred space where God and people dwell together. It is not merely a *pietistic spirituality* rather a spirituality that transforms not only an individual's personal life but also affects the way how a person is related to the world just as the sacred space reconstructs the society in God's definition of morality and ethics.

However, these visions were the visions of some insignificant peoples whose speeches and visions made complete sense to the *remnant* of Israel while these messages were always ignored by the majority. Most of the Hebrew Bible consists of the theological understanding of a minority in society. God, as represented by the biblical writers, is a God of insignificant people too who could use them as channels to revolutionize the whole society.

#### 4.4 A PROMISE OF LIFE

We have discussed previously that the vocation of Israel was to bring back the Edenic life where the people and Yahweh dwell together overlapping Humans' space with God's space. We have seen that the temple of God in Jerusalem was like a micro-cosmos which represents God's intention for the whole cosmos to fill it with His glorious presence. In other words, the people and the land of Israel were supposed to be like God's people in God's land bringing heaven and earth together in their space. It is not a faith about escaping from the human world into God's realm rather it is a demonstration of what it looks like to have Yahweh in their midst and how the world is transformed when His glory is acknowledged and respected by the world.

However, the sanctity of God's space was not honoured by the people as expected. The land was polluted because of violence, immorality, and people's greed for selfish power and wealth. When the existence of people in the land has become a threat to the sacredness of the sacred space, God withdrew Himself from the land and the temple and drove people out of the sight so that the land may rest. The wickedness of the people did their best to cultivate *death* instead of life. While Moses

suggested them to choose life and blessing by remaining loyal to their God, they chose the opposite of it and thus were not allowed to stay in the land anymore (Deut. 30:11-20). With the tragedy of Babylonian exile, the temple and the land had become useless land sites. The land that is supposed to become Eden has become the opposite of it. It became like a desert and a wilderness which is the opposite of the Garden and which reminds the readers of the chaotic state of the earth before the creation and order. Jeremiah describes it as a desolate land without human beings or animals (Jer. 32-33).

Ezekiel 37 describes the scene as a valley of dry bones – without any hope of life. It is a place abandoned by everyone. A place without any form of life and existence. But the prophet envisions these dry bones being resurrected and the valley is filled with human beings – living and active. The imagery of bringing life to these dry bones resembles the picture that we get on the second page of our Bible where God forms a human being out of dust and breathes His own life into him and the human becomes a living being. Similarly, these dry bones are erected and God makes the spirit breathe upon these dead bodies and they live.

The prophet connects this vision with the restoration of people back to their land. Therefore, according to this, the return of the exiles and their restoration in their land was an act of resurrection where the people are brought back to their existence. These are the ones who are living in the shadows of suffering and death. Restoration is something unimaginable for them. But Yahweh promises to bring them back to life – a life as God's people in God's land and enjoying the presence of God in sacred space once again.

Beginning with this one, Ezekiel accounts for some other visions that promise life to the dead – the death that is brought by the loss of identity and the meaning of existence and function. He sees the vision of a new temple whose architect is God Himself just as of the tabernacle in Exodus. In chapters 40-46, we find the redefinition of the sacred space and everything related to it. The prophet envisages God's majestic glory returning to this new temple and records several instructions that are laid down by God to keep the life in and around the temple as perfectly ordered. There is a redefinition of everything that is connected to the sacred space – priesthood, sacrifices, festivals and other rituals, admission

into the temple, the division of the land surrounding the temple, and several other instructions. All of these remind the readers of the Exodus and Leviticus where a tabernacle is erected following the instructions of God and the glory of God is descended in this tent. Then there are other sets of instructions regarding assignments of people and their functions within the temple and also the definition of the social structures to revere the presence of God among them. What Ezekiel envisions is a future – a new exodus – that corresponds to the glory that was in the beginning.

After describing all these, the prophet sees a river flowing out of the temple of God and waters the whole land. This water gives life to the trees and also to different creatures. This river continues to flow into the sea and when it mixes with the water of the sea, it brings life there too. The salty water of the sea is transformed into freshwater giving life to many. There are trees of life on the shores of this water that give fruit throughout the year and their leaves serve for medicinal purposes. What does this remind us of? The Garden of Eden. In the second chapter of Genesis, we see a river flowing from the Garden. It waters the whole garden and goes out dividing into four streams. These four great rivers that originate within the garden bring life to the dry and lifeless land. It brings life to the deadliest place – the desert. Wherever this water flows, there is a life and there is a blessing there. The birth of this river is in the Garden of Eden which is the most sacred spot on the earth where God and people dwell together. When the first humans began to make their own choices, they ended themselves on the opposite side of the garden that brought curses and pain.

Similarly, when Ezekiel envisions a river flowing from the temple into the rest of the land, the vision echoes the Edenic life that was glorious and blessed. This vision is a promise of *resurrection and life* to hopeless people. This is a promise of restoration – a restoration that brings life to the land and the rest of the nations. It is sharing in the transforming life of God. It is expressing the life that comes from God and brings resurrection even to the deadliest spots on the earth. It is a vision of life that was in the Garden of Eden. A life that is blessed, glorious, peaceful, and delightful. It was a life without broken relationships. It was a life where God's presence and His vocation are honoured and respected. It was a life that creates a society where there is no threat of life, no feeling of insecurity, no shame,

no hunger nor thirst, no crimes and conflicts, no violence and injustice, no divisions and disparity, no apartheid and untouchability, no outcry of the oppressed and no gods and kings that ruin the peaceful life. This is the same life that is promised again to the ones who are experiencing the horrors of suffering and death.

#### 4.5 A VISION OF THE KING AND THE KINGDOM

Let us come back to the first pages of our Bible where everything begins. God has brought everything into existence. In the ancient world, existence was not about the presence of matter but the assignment of the function. For example, the existence of a lamp is defined by the way it functions. If it has a function/purpose, it exists otherwise if it's without a purpose, it does not exist. In the same fashion, the creation story in Genesis 1 is narrated as God bringing something to existence by calling its name and assigning its function. In such a sense, God is like a king who assigns the tasks to his subjects. Similarly, God creates the world and everything in it and assigns them their functions. At last, God created humankind.

Humans – both male and female – are created in the image and likeness of God. We have discussed in the beginning that the *image of God* has a royal connotation. It is like a king erecting his images in different places of his kingdom to demonstrate his dominion over it. Moreover, the kings in ancient times were understood as the *images of god(s)* because they acted with divine authority. In this particular sense, when it is said that humans are created in the image and likeness of God, it describes that humans are the crown of the creation. If the creation is the Kingdom of God, human beings are the rulers assigned over it. Human beings, themselves, are not supposed to act as autocrats but as stewards. It is a bestowal of authority with responsibility. The humans' ruling over the creation must represent the reign and dominion of God. It is in and through humans, God reclaims the world back to Himself.

The sad outcome of what happened in Genesis 3 is the system of broken relationships and the redefinition of authority in humans' terms. People chose to do what is good in their own eyes. Those who are supposed to rule over the creation are claiming their dominion over fellow human beings. The equal distribution of authority came to its conclusion with the beginning of moral autonomy – when humans began to define good and

evil for themselves seeking freedom from God. The family life has begun to ruin. The siblings turned out to be rivals. The authority of humans began to be defined in terms of violence, injustice, inequality, oppression, and all other attitudes that are against *humanness*. People turned out to act like beasts. The nations that emerged out of one family happened to become rivals of one another with the desire of expanding their power by subduing others.

Humans' self-definition of power had affected the rest of the creation as well. Instead of being the stewards of the land, people began to treat it as a property that can be dominated as wished. The land and the rest of creation became prisoners of the one to whom it has been subjected. Blood is shed without limits. The land cries out for justice. The weak and powerless among the people have become vulnerable to the cruelty and tyranny of the powerful ones. The innocents cry out and no one hears it. The empires are built on the graves of the weak and powerless. This is the picture of the story of all the empires. It's all about conquests, violence, warfare, oppression, destruction, threats, jealousy, treachery, and so on.

If this is the picture of the human kingdom in the rest of the world, let us see what a kingdom looks like among God's people. The politics and sociology of Israel were defined against the existing imperial realities in the world. Israel was defined as an alternative kingdom where life, freedom, and blessing are expressed throughout society. God is their king and He chooses human leaders based on the need of situations. The nations ought to look at Israel and understand what it means to have Yahweh as their king and how the Kingdom of God affects the politics and culture of the society.

However, when the people of Israel desired a king *like other nations have for them*, they rejected Yahweh being their king. However, Yahweh becomes the Lord of Israel once again. But this time through the king He has chosen for Himself – David. God anoints this king and bestows His Spirit to him. This is a way of expressing David becoming a partner of God in ruling the society by following God's terms and instructions for the definition of power. Therefore, God made a covenant with David that He would build a house for him and establish his throne forever. The king who reigns His people on David's throne will be the son of God. They are anointed to bring out the purposes of God. However, the failure of Israel's monarchy led the whole nation into exile.



The fall of Jerusalem happened in the year 587/6 BC. After the fall of the Babylonian Empire to the Persian Empire, Cyrus, the Persian Emperor, issued a decree that Jews can return to their homeland and rebuild their city and temple. This decree was issued around 537/6 BC which commenced the return of captives. Indeed, the literal Babylonian exile had ended. They got their homeland back, they rebuilt their temple and they began to settle back in the state of Judah. However, the rule of pagan empires continued leaving Jews as a vassal nation. Greek Empire followed Persian. Later, the Jews were under the power of Ptolemais of Egypt for some time and then were subdued by the Seleucid Syrian Empire. The worst things began to follow these events. Antiochus IV whose epithet was Epiphanies (meaning god-manifest) erected the image of a Greek god, Zeus, in the very temple of Jerusalem demanding people to show allegiance to his empire. Perils after perils followed. All such things made the people feel that their exile continued, in their *homeland*. It seems that Yahweh has not returned to His temple and that He is not the King over them.

Now, in the context of the failed kings of Israel in general and in the context of the oppressive rule of pagan empires over Israel, the loyal people of God expected for an alternative king and an alternative kingdom that would bring a climax to the dominion of pagan powers over them. People began to recount Yahweh's promise to David. Reading through the narrative, psalms, and prophets makes it evident that the expected king is someone like David himself. The anointed one (or Messiah/Christ) is the king who would bring the Kingdom of God. In and through him, God would become the King over His people and reclaim the whole world to Himself. Let us briefly examine how poets, prophets, and seers envisioned a new king and an alternative kingdom in the shadow of imperialism and its harsh effects on God's people from the very beginning of Babylonian suppression.

At the outset, let me say something about Messianic hope in the Old Testament. It is not that God's messengers are merely predicting that a king would come to establish a kingdom in such and such a pattern. They are not bringing the Messianic hope from the vacuum. Then, what does this mean? Aren't they predicting at all? Well, the right place to begin with this is what on earth is a *messianic hope*? Who is this anointed one? The idea of an anointed one is not foreign to the Israelites. The kings and high priests were anointed before they began their function.

In one sense, the anointing alludes to the faith of the people that God has appointed this person to act in the world and to fulfil His purposes. This is to say, God has bestowed His authority to the king/high priest to act in His place. They share in the activity of God and do the things that He wanted to do on earth. While the kings maintain the order, peace, and security of the people, the high priests administer God's forgiveness to the people. They are the ones who declare a person clean so that this *cleansed* and *forgiven* person finds a way to restore his/her identity and fellowship in the community. In other words, the anointed ones are the channels of God's activity in the world and among His people.

Keeping this idea, we could understand the expectation of God's people for the anointed one. This vision for another king developed in times of disorder, insecurity, and peacelessness of the people. There are kings but they have become the definitions of cruelty, oppression, injustice, and ungodliness. Instead of bringing order and security into the society, they dismantle the ordered social structures, exploit the people, exercise their authority to the maximum, and gain income from the people's hardship. When the very kings of Israel have been corrupted, their anointing has no meaning at all because they do not represent the Kingdom of God which gives people freedom, order, justice, and peace. In such a setting of *failed* kings, a minority of the people began to envision a perfect king who would fit God's definition of authority and responsibility. They envisaged an alternative kingdom where there is no fear but the glory of Yahweh fills all the earth. This is a vision against the existing realities of the kings and their kingdom.

The people of God understood Yahweh as their shepherd. Hebrew poets used the shepherd language to explain Yahweh's leading, caring, and administering over His people. Similarly, they understood their leaders as the shepherds appointed by Yahweh to govern them and protect them. When the leaders failed in their function, it meant that they behaved as false shepherds whose primary concern is not the wellbeing of the flock but the benefits they can enjoy from the flock. Thus, people have been led astray. The minorities – the poor, weak, and vulnerable ones in society – became the victims of *hunter-shepherds*. They became like sheep led to slaughter – slaughtered in their own fold by their own shepherds. Read Ezekiel 34 to understand this tension more clearly.

In the times of exile and the rule of pagan empires over God's people, this vision for a new king and another kingdom reached its peak because of their bitter experiences under the foreign rule. They longed for a day when the Davidic dynasty is restored and they have a king over themselves who is someone like David himself. While there are also other visions where God Himself returns to His land and His temple just as the king returns to his kingdom. They wanted Yahweh, Yahweh Himself, to become king over them. Reading carefully the prophetic texts, we cannot make any rough distinction between Yahweh becoming King over Israel from a Davidic king coming to power. This is to say, when the Davidic dynasty is restored, it is as if Yahweh's kingship over His people is restored. In other words, the rise of the anointed one and the kingship of Yahweh are parallel visions.

The vision of the kingdom, once again, corresponds to the traditions of Israel. This is a vision of a kingdom that is peaceful where everyone enjoys their own space without the threat of being plundered or conquered. Sometimes the kingdom is described in cosmic terms where it not only brings justice, peace, and order within Israel but among all the nations and even among the beasts of the land. Sometimes the vision of the kingdom comes in the terms of *a new heaven* and *new earth* where everything is set right and the laments of people – the poor and weak – are turned into the songs of joy in the renewed creation with restored relationships. No one harms the other in this kingdom. When psalmists sing of the enthronement of Yahweh over all the earth, they look for a time when all the people are judged – people are set right and justice is established. They expected this to be a time when all people are treated with equity and nobody is dealt with unfairly.

The peace in this kingdom is the result of justice. It is the outcome of setting things right and making things ordered. This peace (*shalom*) contradicts the peace in the ideology of the kingdoms and empires of the world. For the rulers of this world, peace in the empire could mean silence – a complete silence of the voices that cry out to them. It is a kind of peace where there is no protest, no rebellion, and no incidents of treason in the land that is under their charge. This could mean that the voices of a minority of people would be suppressed even if they cry out for justice in the land. The Empire and the people of the State are more tuned to the voices and decrees of the powerful ones. It is a condition where a *majority's* opinion is established. When a minority of

people do not agree with the ideology and function of the empire, they are silenced without even hearing the reason for their protest. Sometimes they are silenced by violent means – execution. This is to say, the peace in the Empire is a peace that denies the equity and wellbeing of all the individuals and all the social groups in the land. It is peace that silences all protests and outcries.

But the peace that the people of God, a remnant, hoped for was a peace that is the result of justice and equity. It is a *perfect peace* that treats people impartially. This is a peace that affects every corner of the society with leaving no one unconcerned. This peace is a piece of good news to the powerless who, otherwise, are forced to live in the shadow of imperial and majoritarian forces that promise life but bring death. Their hopes, visions, and plight are simply ignored. They are forced to live in a society defined by those who have power. It is to them, the Kingdom of God offers peace – a peace that comes by setting things right and ordered. It is a peace that restores and transforms society. But this peace could be a threat to those who lynch the lives of the poor, powerless, and vulnerable ones in the society because divine justice is the forerunner of this peace. Justice does not always refer to punishing the wrongdoer but most of the time it refers to restoring people to equity so that things get right, ordered, and perfect – the restoration of the whole creation as it was in the beginning.

Psalms 72 looks forward to a king in whose reign the justice is rendered to all and the poor and weak of the land rejoice in his reign. It is a prayer and a hope for the king in whose reign the whole earth is filled with the glory of God. Zechariah promises that one day God would return to Jerusalem – or Zion – who cuts off the sword from the land. Daniel, in his vision, sees the kingdom as being given to one like a son of man and the beast-like empire being destroyed. Let me just give a quick idea of the latter.

In Daniel 7, the apocalyptic visionary sees *beasts* coming out of the sea and exercising dominion over *humans*, particularly over the people of God. See how the author uncovers the reality of the empires of the world. They are like beasts ruling over humans and the humans are being crushed by these beastly powers. What does this mean? From the very beginning, the definition of power and authority by the rulers was not corresponding to the idea of *the image of God* – ruling like God. Humans gradually

became *inhumane* in the course of history and established kingdoms and empires that are marked with violence, corruption, ungodliness, and wickedness. Thus, they are depicted as *wild beasts* ruling over the human ones.

In his vision, Daniel sees a fourth beast that succeeds the previous one. This beast does its best – or the worst – to crush down the people of God. Then suddenly the vision is reoriented. The thrones are placed in heaven and the Ancient One sits over the throne which is like a judge taking his seat in the court to finally decide what is right so that justice is established. In the same way, God takes up the throne to decide the destiny of the cruel and tyrannical beast and hand over the kingdom to the right one. In his vision, Daniel sees one like a human being (*ben adam – a son of man*) comes to the scene. The Ancient One delivers the kingdom of the earth to this person while the beast is destroyed. In some sense, this son of man stands in the same position as God does. This vision is interpreted in the same chapter that this son of man is the symbol of God's people. This is to say the people of God who are being exploited by the beastly empires would be given authority over the nations. However, the image of the son of man is both collective as well as the individual.

If you notice it right, this vision seems to be unrealistic. The world is for the powerful ones who rule like beasts without compassion and a human heart. They go beyond their state of creatureliness to equate themselves to God claiming to be all-powerful. They play with the lives of the poor and the powerless in society. These governments seem to have absolute over their subjects. However, the apocalyptic vision of Daniel demolishes the vision of the popular dominant society. It uncovers the politics of violence and injustice as the politics of wild beasts. It looks forward to a time when human beings are the rulers while the beasts remain calm and subjected to human power. Indeed, human beings are weaklings who are forced to live in the shadow of the beastly powers. Yet, the vision of Daniel strongly disagrees with that majoritarian autocracy and calls them to become gentle and compassionate as human beings.

This is the hope (of a minority of people) for the king and the Kingdom that contrasts with the existing realities. Isaiah says that one final day, a herald would run into Jerusalem with the *good news* of Yahweh becoming King (Isa. 52:7). This is the summary of Jewish eschatology – their vision for the end. It is not at all about *the end of the world* as many

popular Christians present it today. The *end* is, indeed, a new beginning by putting an end to the evil in the world that is the consequence of human choices.

The Book of Isaiah envisages a kingdom where the humans and beasts live together in peace. It is a kingdom where the babbling babies play with the poisonous serpents and wild beasts graze with the meekest and weakest creatures and yet no creature does any harm to another creature. Looking at the context of Isaiah, this vision is not merely a vision of peace in the animal kingdom but also a peaceful existence of humankind. It is a time when the weakest of the society lives fearlessly in the sight of powerful rulers. It is a time when the oppressors turn their swords and spears into ploughs and live in harmony with the oppressed. It is a time when society is healed and the relationships are restored to the normalcy that God wants to see in society.

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.  
The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. (Isa. 11:1-9)*

*The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD,  
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.  
For the tyrant shall be no more,  
and the scoffer shall cease to be;  
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off — those who cause a person to lose  
a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds  
deny justice to the one in the right. (Isa. 29:19-21)*

These prophetic poems seem to be insignificant and unrealistic yet they are designed as powerful weapons that aim to destroy the majoritarian understanding and present an alternative existence of the present world. The vision is strongly connected with the prophets' anticipation for a perfect king whose power and authority brings justice, righteousness and peace into society.

By understanding this, it is evident that the messianic idea is purely, although not absolutely, political. But this political thought is bracketed within the tradition and hope. This is a political vision that is purely theological. Moreover, the idea of good news (or gospel) is attached with this vision of a king and the kingdom. It is a politics of justice and compassion that is set against the politics of oppression and injustice and mercilessness. The economics of this politics is the economics of distributive justice that is set against the economics of success and pride and richness. Such politics and economics are defined by the religion of a God of compassion, grace, patience, loyalty, and faithfulness. It is a politics of God who is free from, or sometimes even against, the imperial structures of this world. This means that Messiah is a political figure whose ideology is corresponding to the *political science* and *economics* of Yahweh who is *free* unlike any other gods in the contemporary religions. In other words, this anointed king brings the reign of heaven on earth by being truly loyal to the covenant between Yahweh and His people. The announcement that 'God reigns' or 'God has become king' is the good news.

Christians today simply push this revolutionary vision into a distant future thinking that the biblical prophets are predicting something that

would happen after several thousand years of their proclamation. Popular Christianity is simply domesticated with the otherworldly spirituality focusing on how to escape from this world into a better world. Christianity became something that is never concerned with the realities and the situations that are taking place around in the world. We are satisfied with pietistic faith that is concerned with *individualistic* salvation. Our spirituality is simply limited to personal faith, personal salvation, personal change, joy and peace within self, a personal relationship with God that has nothing to do with the rest of the world. We help others, we do charity and other social works either because of the idea that we should love our neighbours or increase our good works so that we might get a reward from God but not at all to make the world a better place by partnering with God. I'm not saying that this is absolutely wrong. What I'm trying to say is that we have seriously and dangerously domesticated our Bible, domesticated our God and domesticated His vision of the world to our vision of *another world* which cannot be established nor affected by what we do. We would seriously discuss this thing in another chapter.

The whole narrative of the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament, ends with a hope for the climax of the long story of God and His people. Its unclosed ending raises several questions in an attempt to answer different issues. Its definition of religion and society, its definition of hope and its definition of the partnership between God and humanity opens up a new question: is there a climax for this story? Would there be a new creation, new humanity and the reign of God inaugurated on earth? Did God truly return to the city that was in ruins? Did Yahweh's glory truly return to the temple? Were the people of God truly forgiven of their sins and were they liberated? What about the promise of life, a king and the kingdom? Did they ever exist on earth? Is it ever possible for someone to set up such a revolutionary society so that it would express the unification of heaven plus earth reality? Or is it just another vision for a *utopia*? Is it simply another expression of Buddha's search for a world without poverty, sickness and death? Or is this something for which everyone must keep on hoping?

While these all are the questions that come up on the scene when one is truly tuned to the narrative, poetry, and prophetic visions and messages of the Old Testament, suddenly this large section (nearly 75% of our Bible) ends abruptly without a proper conclusion. When we move to the section of the New Testament, these questions continue to echo in the



hearts of the readers who seriously read their Bible. There is tension: how would the New Testament bring a climax to the long story? Is Jesus fit to these themes? Was he really the Messiah? Well, let us try to explore the New Testament with special reference to the person and work of Jesus.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# BEHOLD, THE KINGDOM

One of the most controversial figures in human history who has been a hot topic of many debates for many centuries could be none other than Jesus himself. Probably, no one in history would never have been discussed a lot like Jesus even after a long time of his life and times. Some people elevate him to the clouds by pondering on his life and teachings while some others simply throw him down to valleys saying that Jesus never existed or even if he existed, he is no different from any other religious leaders and supposing that he is yet another *moral teacher*. Let us discuss more in the next chapter while in this chapter we focus on the person and work of Jesus within his time and space and how the New Testament brings a climax to the Old Testament.

The key question while we discuss Jesus is the question of his identity: who is Jesus? This is a question that is very hard to answer in simple terms. Any attempt to define the identity of Jesus in modern terms simply limits his person and work to a set of *the systematic framework*. Of course, this was the question that Jesus himself asked his disciples saying, “What do the people say of me? Who do *you* think I am?” The answer to that question was that he is the Messiah, the Son of Living God. Jesus appreciated that saying that it’s a revelation from God Himself. However,

that title is pregnant with a dense theological understanding within the historical context of the first century.

If the same is the question to you, what would be your answer? Who do you think he is? Indeed, your cultural and philosophical background influences it. Would you simply say, “Well, He is the pre-existent God from the beginning - the second person of the Godhead – who became man and came to earth, lived a holy life and showed us the way how to get into *heaven*, died for our sins in our place so that we may have a relationship with God the Father and would return to *take up* into heaven all those who believe in him”? Or would you say, “He is my *personal saviour*”? Or if you are a liberal thinker, you would simply say, “well, he is the greatest moral teacher who ever existed on earth and did a lot of social activities to liberate people by helping the poor, weak and outcasts. He is one of the best prophets”? Or else would you say, “He is one of the greatest liars who is another *failed* Messiah who deceived people and died a criminal death. The Jesus you see today in the Bible is simply a reconstruction of his person by a band of his followers who wanted to boost his identity and popularity”? Okay. Whatever may be your answer, you would be right in some sense but every modern reconstruction of Jesus’ identity is simply a piece of broken mirror because it does not completely reflect the thought of the first century, even if you construct your portrait of Jesus based on the biblical texts. I’m not saying that you would be wrong but I’m trying to say that we are right only in some sense.

To understand the person and work of Jesus, we need to put him back in his own historical, political, economic, religious and sociological settings. More than that, we need to have a clear understanding of the Old Testament and where did Jesus stand in the emended narrative of the Hebrew Bible. It is where we find a glimpse of the meaning of his life, ministry, teachings, death and resurrection. It is not simply about the studying of background but a study of the matrix within which Jesus lived. When we speak of the matrix of Jesus, we understand not only the background that sets the scene but also a mutual effect and conflict between the factors. The world of Jesus affected his words and actions and the words and deeds of Jesus affected his world. There is tension between the person and the world, there is a conflict and there is a contribution.

Let us continue with our study of how Jesus brings the narrative and hope of the Old Testament to a climax and how does he fit the title

that is associated with him – the Messiah.

## 5.1 A WORLD ORDERLY DISORDERED

The time when Jesus lived and ministered was, in fact, a much pressured time in the history of the world and particularly in the history of a Jewish homeland. Winds and storms were hitting from all directions and Jesus was caught in the centre of this storm. The life of Jesus was squeezed between the imperial power structures of Rome and the troubled land of Jews. He stepped into this stormy sea and began to sort out everything. Let us journey to the world of Jesus and explore it and try to understand who he was, what he spoke, what he did and how do all these *fit* into that matrix.

### 5.1.1 GOSPEL OF ROME

To continue our discussion, we need to do a little historical study about the Roman Empire in the first century BC. Until the last half of the first century BC, Rome continued its republican style of government. But with the rise of Julius Caesar, it gradually declined and gave rise to imperialism. After conquering Gaul, Julius Caesar declared himself to be a dictator over the Western world. Such declaration of supreme power by Caesar was inevitable for his co-regents. His supreme power came to an end when he was assassinated by Brutus and Marcus in 44 BC. The situations gave rise to chaos in the Roman world and there were a series of civil wars. It was still hanging between republicanism and imperialism. A majority of the Roman republic hated the senators who were responsible for Caesar's assassination. There were continuous conflicts between Caesar's assassins and his loyal ones.

All this chaos created tension within the Empire and the people were looking for a *saviour* who could sort out everything and bring order to the world. Finally, it was 31 BC. Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, brought an end to everything. He defeated his rival Mark Antony and his lover Cleopatra. He also executed all those who are responsible for Caesar's death and thus paved the way for the formation of the Roman Empire. The citizens celebrated the victory. They celebrated the *peace* and *order* that was brought by Octavian.

No sooner than his enthronement in 27 BC as the first emperor of Rome, he was given the name Augustus which means *exalted one*. The

famous poets of Rome including Virgil and Horace began to compose writings and poems in praise of Augustus even to the extent of making him a divine one. Despite his assassination, Julius Caesar has found a place in the Roman pantheon because of what his adopted son has done. Since Julius Caesar is a god of the Roman Empire alongside the other Greco-Roman deities, Augustus is praised as the *son of god*. The Romans celebrated him as the *saviour of the world* because he has rescued the world from becoming chaotic because of the civil wars and bringing *peace* and *order*. People began to mark Augustus' birthday as the New Year of their calendar because they considered his birth as the beginning of *the Gospel* (*good news*). And the good news is something like this: "Look, the time has come for which we have been long waiting. Augustus, the son of god, has brought *salvation* to our world and he is our *lord* and *god*." Shrines for Caesar began to emerge throughout the Roman Empire. The following is an inscription found in Asia Minor dating back to 9 BC:

The most divine Caesar... we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things...; for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aura; Caesar... the common good Fortune of all.... The beginning of life and vitality.... All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year.... Whereas Providence, which has regulated our whole existence... has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us [the emperor] Augustus, whom it [Providence] filled with strength for the welfare of men, and who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and [whereas,] having become [god] manifest (*phaneis*), Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times... in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him..., and whereas, finally, the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of good news (*euangelion*) concerning him [therefore let a new era begin from his birth].<sup>1</sup>

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1 As quoted by Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 23-24.

Many developments had taken place with the beginning of Roman imperialism. Highways were established all over the *world* – the Roman world – including the petty Jewish homeland. The roads ran through the urban centres connecting to Rome. This brought a lot of development in trade and commerce because sea trade was often dangerous because of pirates. Rome was also excellent in its military power. This is how, the Romans thought, that the history of the world has reached its climax. A new age has begun. The world would not be the same as it was until now. This is the *gospel*, the *new beginning*.

Rome also had its strategic ways to maintain peace in the Empire. Any threat or any protest was silenced sooner than it began. Often they employed the most brutal ways to silence the voices that raised against them. One of the much-known forms of execution was crucifixion. The criminals, often those who are charged with treason, and disloyal slaves were hanged to the cross. It was one of the most despised forms of execution where the criminals are put to public shame, hanging naked on the cross and died a grievous death after long days of hanging and starving. The crucified ones were expecting a soon death. It was as if the death was looking into their eyes but still torturing them to hell without taking their lives. Their dead bodies are not buried but left to the wild birds and beasts until they are decomposed. Other forms of horrible death punishments were burning alive and throwing to the wild beasts. They employed such horrific means of execution because they wanted their enemies not simply to die but to be annihilated – even their corpses. This is how the *Pax Romana* is maintained.

Slavery and taxation were other examples to understand the situation of the Roman Empire in the first century. Economically, there had been a lot of deficit of resources in the city of Rome because of migrants and an increase in population. To satisfy the needs of the city, the other nations were taxed highly and the grain and meat were imported to the city through different means. The imperial methods of taxation deprived the people of the satisfaction of their basic needs and their identity. Society was classified as the rich and the poor. The poor and weak are often neglected. The sick ones are been cared for less and often they were considered *useless* people.

I think you might have got a picture. It was a world that was celebrating the dawn of the new age. We cannot simply limit the imperial

religion as the mythology that the ancients blindly believed. Although it is a myth for us, it was the founding ideology of the Roman Empire. It would be an impossible task to divide the mythology around Roman emperors and the politics of the Roman Empire. Usually, the empires created their gods and religion and centralized a religion, sometimes, to create unity and stability in the Empire. Although the other religions are tolerated, any attack of the major religion would be similar to inviting one's own death. This was how Rome was celebrating the conclusion of the present age and the beginning of a whole new era.

### **5.1.2 A TROUBLED LAND**

While the Roman world is celebrating its own gospel of triumph, peace and order, here we come to the Jewish homeland. (I would preferably use the terms like Jewish homeland or Jewish nation instead of the popular title Palestine because of the issues around that name.) Here we find people who are still waiting for good news that Yahweh, their God, is the King of the world and He is beginning it through his anointed king. Let us briefly explore the Jewish world of Jesus because he is purely Jewish and all of his messages were purely Jewish in nature.

Well, let us begin with the political system of the Jewish nation. After the Maccabean revolt in 160s BC, Jews somehow formed their independent kingdom that lasted for less than a century. The Hasmonean dynasty came to power yet it was not accepted by some of the Jews. However, the Hasmonean dynasty declined because of civil wars and the intervention of Rome. The Herodian dynasty that was of Idumean (Edomite) origin replaced the former one. Herod the Great became the first puppet king of the Roman Empire in the Jewish nation in 37 BC. Although he was allowed to reign, Rome also appointed the governors for taxation and order.

When Herod the Great assumed power, he was a very loyal friend of Mark Antony. But when Augustus, after defeating Antony, came to learn that Herod was a friend of Antony, Herod made a promise to Caesar that he would be no less loyal to the Roman Empire. Thus, once again, the Jewish nation came under the power of the pagan empire and this time a powerful empire than all others. He also built and named cities and temples for Caesar. To receive Jewish honour, he refurbished the Jerusalem temple and built it so beautifully that it was the largest and



most magnificent temple in the ancient world.

Nevertheless, Herod the Great was very protective of his power and very jealous of his rivals. He was very careful to protect his power that he immediately executed anyone who was reported to be conspiring against him. He murdered his beloved wife Mariamme and two of his sons for being falsely accused of plotting against him. He also executed another son just before five days of his death who made false accusations against Mariamme and the other two. He also executed the members of the Jewish judicial court (Sanhedrin) who opposed him. In their place, he appointed his political supporters. He erected a statue of an eagle on the Jerusalem temple but when some young religious men took it down, he had them executed. He was so conservative of his throne that he arrested the nobles of the nation while he was on his deathbed and ordered his servants to murder all of them as soon as he dies. He wanted his death as the darkest day in Jewish history and that no one should rejoice over his death. However, this did not happen. The nobles were released and the people celebrated.

The death of Herod resulted in political unrest. The Jewish state was divided into three provinces and ruled by three of Herod's sons. The Judean province was governed by Herod Archelaus. But because of his ill-strategies, the Judean province came under the direct control of the Roman Empire and Pontius Pilate was sent to Jerusalem to establish Roman government while Herod Antipas and Herod Philip continued their rule in the other two provinces. Herod Antipas was so crafty that he wanted to become the *king of Jews* like his father. He married his brother's Philip's wife for this reason. He followed the example of his father and tried to be favoured by Caesar. He built and named cities after Caesar. He commercialized fishing in the Sea of Galilee which brought much income to the Empire.

Despite these incidents, the Jewish land was a land of unrest. They always opposed Rome's government. There are different ways of how they reacted towards Roman imperialism. Some simply tried to accommodate and compromise with the Roman officials. They supported the Empire and received many benefits. We can call this class an *aristocratic class* which included Sadducees and Herodians. Others were *rigorous nationalists*. They never supported the Roman Empire and often took violent means to protest against the government. They were so convicted that they are

God's channels of bringing His kingdom into the world. They thought of themselves to be the *freedom fighters* who could rescue the Jewish nation from the oppressive pagan rule. Alongside their protests, they were hoping for the Messianic King to arrive early to liberate the nation.

There is another group of people who are very conservative of their law and traditions. We can call them *legalists* who stressed the strict observance of Mosaic Law and all other traditions. They insisted that the *rich in the spirit* will enter first into the Kingdom of God while all the *poor in the spirit* such as tax-collectors, sinners and all others who fail to observe the traditions will be excluded. They were the best interpreters of the law and called people to legalism which became a burden for the common people. We can include Pharisees and scribes in this class. There is yet one more sect which was a sort of *escapist-conservative class*. These are the ones who simply withdraw themselves from the rest of the people considering themselves as the children of light and all others as children of darkness. They spent time meditating the law, away from the social connections and believed that the Messiah would come from their community.

While this is the national setting in general, let us look into economics and religion in particular. The economic system of the Roman Empire was not favourable for Jews as a whole. The Jewish society was made up of many peasants and poor who were living a *hand-to-mouth* kind of life. They were burdened with heavy taxes. Since Rome had built highways that spread throughout its world, the people who tread on these highways are liable to pay road-taxes. There was taxation levied upon every sector of economics and civil life. People got tired of draining their wealth. This is one of the reasons why people developed a bitter attitude towards tax-collectors. Roman officials appointed these tax-collectors from among Jews themselves. This made people hate these publicans because they considered them as channels of the curse upon God's people as they worked for the government that oppresses the people of God. Although some tax collectors were greedy, others were loyally doing their job. Yet, the tax-collectors are always thrown into the bad light.

While the rich in the society were so self-satisfied, the poor suffered the consequences. They never looked upon the poor with compassion. They made parties and invited only those who are equal to their status

while the poor and weak are always neglected. Even the Temple of Jesus' day was so corrupted. We know that the temple was considered as God's dwelling place among people. It was a place where people received forgiveness, peace and joy. But this very temple has become the definition of something else in the first century. The chief priests and the temple officials were appointed by the government. They serve both God and mammon (wealth and prosperity).

The temple currency was different from the common currency in the land. The people used the Roman coins for their trade and commerce in the country because it was official and legal. But when people came to the temple, this public currency was not accepted. The religious leaders appointed money exchangers in the temple to convert the people's currency into the temple currency. In this process, these money exchangers gained a lot of wealth. Worst of all, trade and commerce was brought into the temple. People who want to bring an offering must purchase the animal or bird from the temple itself. Thus, the worship of God has become so burdened for the people. They need a God-appointed king to sort all these out.

The Jewish nation, in general, was expecting the inauguration of Yahweh's Kingdom anytime now. They were expecting the promised Davidic King to come. They were truly waiting for the *right moment* (*kairos*) – the time of fulfilment. They believed that history would come to its climax anytime now. Passover is the season when the people's trust and hope in Yahweh were renovated once again. The Passover was the festival that reminded people of a tyrant Pharaoh who oppressed people and tried to levy heavy tasks over them. But Yahweh overthrew the power of the pharaoh and liberated Israel from slavery. He made a covenant with them and they became His people. This memory of exodus served as a ray of hope for the people in the first century too. They were waiting for a new exodus to happen but this time within their homeland. This festival reminds them of the promise of the new covenant and new life by Yahweh through His prophets. They were also reminded of the glory of God that comes to dwell among the people. This Passover-moment fuelled their hopes once again. They were waiting for the good news – behold, your God has finally come to reign. They were waiting for the *Son of God* to come – the promised Davidic King – who would bring *peace* and *order* in the world and *rescue* the world.

There is one common point among the majority of the people which is an ideology of *us* against *them*. All of them considered that when God's Kingdom comes, it would be for *us* and *we* would be the children of the Kingdom while all of *them* (enemy powers) would be destroyed. To be precise, with all of their own faults, their own selfish ambitions, their own greed for power and wealth and their own disordered society, they were waiting for Yahweh to establish His Kingdom *for this nation*. Again the *Grand National narrative* of Jews could not match with the vision of Yahweh and the vision of prophets. The aspirations of the majority were at the cost of minorities. If the Kingdom of God – the politics of Yahweh – becomes a reality anytime now, it would rather be against those who expected the kingdom despite their drift from the national vision of Yahweh. What they did was *the domestication of Yahweh and His Kingdom to fit their ideological aspirations*.

### 5.1.3 A SUDDEN SURPRISE

It seems as if Jews and Romans were copying each other's ideas and worldviews regarding the *end* (climax) of world history. They were giving almost the same titles to the one who is bringing a conclusion to history. They were speaking of the dawn of the new age which had already begun for one group but yet to come for the other group. There is tension. No one is compromising with the other. There is an eager expectation for the Messianic King which created several issues. To speak of another king or another kingdom with the Roman Empire was a serious crime. It was treason, anti-imperialism and disloyalty. Any such attempts were soon suppressed by violent means. Jewish history tells us a lot of revolutionaries who died criminal death at the hands of Roman leaders because of their hope for their own king.

Place yourself in such a world with a lot of unrest, trouble and the vigorous expectation for an independent nation and put your legs in the shoes of the narrators of the Old Testament. In such a setting, many times, your hope would have vanished because of the adverse times but still, somehow you are putting your trust in God because you still consider Him as *reliable, stable, trustworthy, truthful* and *loyal*. You would be looking for a signpost that points you to the *faithfulness of God* in keeping His promises, renewing His covenant by forgiving the people.

Suddenly a voice is heard, not in the capital city or a royal court,

but in the wilderness, by the bank of a river that “Behold, the Kingdom of God is near. Repent and be baptized.” In simple terms, ‘look, finally, the right moment has come. God is going to become the in-charge of the world. He is going to come anytime now. Therefore, turn around and receive the forgiveness of sins.’ People might have been not only surprised at this announcement but also took it seriously. When people came to John the Baptist, they did not consider him as a mere religious reformer. Think again, you are placed in such a world and hoping for the Kingdom of God to bring a climax to the history and hope of God’s people. When you hear such an announcement, I’m sure you would not call him a religious leader nor would you simply pass the way along thinking that he is another kingdom-freak. This setting makes us understand how and why he got the attention of a lot of people.

All of the four Gospel-writers quoted from Isaiah 40:3 and Luke quotes it till verse 6 to give a better picture of the prophetic words of Isaiah. They all applied this to the announcement of John the Baptizer. Looking in the setting of Isaiah’s words, they were not mere predictions that such and such a person will come and do such and such things. The meaning of the text in Isaiah was a message of *a new exodus*. It was spoken to the people who were living in the times of trouble and darkness of their lives, banished from their homeland and guilty of facing the consequences of their own choices. To these people, the prophet comes and says that their time of exile has come to end. Someone far away in the wilderness crying out to prepare the way for the Lord. It is a message that Yahweh is going to return to the people and return to their land. This would be a time when all the people will gaze at the glory of Yahweh. When this applied to the announcement of John the Baptist, it is evident that it was the time when God is going to return to His people.

What does it mean when he calls people to repent? The word repentance simply means to turn around, to make a U-turn or a grand shift. Repentance is not merely a change in the heart and mind. When we read the words of John, we would understand his message. Standing in the tradition of prophets, he calls people to change their ways, change their way of expectations and their mind to accept the coming Kingdom of God. He was standing against the national narrative of the Jews of his day. “Do not start to make excuses that you are the children of Abraham,” he said, “You’re nothing but the brood of vipers!” These are harsh words, you would say. John was not exaggerating his message here.

While the majority of the nation, with *their* ideology, expected God to become *their* king. John was standing against the national aspirations of all the leaders of society.

What John was trying to communicate was that the Kingdom is coming. Israel's God is going to return and become in-charge of the nation and the world. But it would not be in the same way as they were expecting it to be. The nation has drifted away from the vision of God. But they are satisfied with that. They want God to become their king but on *their* terms. They wanted God to be on their side and against those who are defined to be the enemies and outcasts. The outcasts of society are forced to live in unwanted places. The legalistic arrangements of the society were defined by the religious leaders of the nation about what is acceptable and what is not, what is right and wrong and what is clean and unclean. Although they based their definitions on the Torah, they went to the extreme of creating a society that stands in contrast with the vision of God and the prophets. The Sabbath which was the day of rest from all the duty and anxious labour has itself become a way of enslavement. The Temple that was the definition of God's indwelling with the people and a place where their prayers are answered, their worship is accepted and their sins were forgiven has itself become a definition of injustice, economic oppression, and the den of robbers.

If such was the state of the Jewish nation and their nationalism, they are on the verge of being rejected while the repentant remnant can find their way to experiencing the Kingship of God. If they remember the exodus event of God overthrowing the oppressors to liberate the people and make a covenant with the liberated ones, they cannot expect Yahweh to make a covenant with pharaohs of the society. Being themselves the oppressors with all kinds of evil within them yet presenting themselves to be religious and pious group and stagnant to the voices of the ones who are crying aloud because of their actions, they are expecting God to be on *their* side – letting their injustice, cruelty, otherworldliness and ungodliness continue – and against their enemies – Romans. This is a sheer parody of God's character. "This cannot happen," John boldly criticized society and called them to turn their ways. Unless they become what they are ought to be, they cannot understand what God is going to do and how He is going to be in charge of the world.

The critique of the national narrative by John the Baptist and his

kingdom message had put him in danger. When he criticized Herod Antipas for his adulterous relationship by marrying his brother's wife, he was arrested and eventually murdered. But the kingdom-announcement did not end up there. There was a man named Jesus who came to John to be baptized. It was toward this person the whole ministry was directed. But what does it mean Jesus being baptized by John? Does it mean he was a sinner? There are a couple of ways to understand Jesus' baptism. His baptism was a sign of accepting the new vision of the Kingdom of God. Secondly, it was narrated as the anointing of a king. When Jesus was baptized, he was declared as God's beloved Son and the Spirit of God descended upon him in the form of a dove. This Jesus began his proclamation that the time has fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near. The people are called to repent and believe this *good news*.

This man began to teach in the synagogues, journey throughout the land, made teachings that were revolutionary and prophetic, healed the sick and forgave the sins of the people. He created a band of followers who became his very close associates. Those who were defined as unclean, unacceptable and unworthy by the society began to find their way into restoration with the community. This man was sharing his food and space with the *detestable* and *despised* persons in the nation. There is a state of rejoicing, freedom and forgiveness in his community. No wonder why Jesus had become a piece of hot news throughout the land. Crowds began to follow him while the majoritarian society criticized him. It was as if the history of the world was coming to its climax and the new age is beginning. It was as if the same person who is announcing the kingdom is the king himself. It was as if God had begun His reign on earth as it is in heaven.

The people began to foretaste the heavenly life on earth. Moreover, Jesus was claiming and doing the things which Israel believed that only their God, Yahweh could do. He was setting things right as if he has all the rights to do so. When people saw what Jesus was saying and doing, it was not as if he was merely a new religious teacher. It would be no wonder if people charged him with sedition because it was more like a political movement with the announcement of the coming of a new kingdom with new policies. Some suspected him to be their long-awaited king however some rejected him as a king at all because he did not stand in support of the *Grand National narrative*.

The people were surprised to see their hopes coming to be fulfilled at last but not as they thought. Finally, a king has come and the new kingdom-of-God-project has been inaugurated and waiting to be consummated. However, Jesus was a different sort of King. He was bringing a different sort of Kingdom to earth which was long-awaited by the Hebrew Scriptures. But this was the Kingdom that was less likely the same kingdom-definition by Jesus' contemporaries.

Jesus stepped into a world that is orderly disordered. There seems to be an order in the society and there seems to be a kind of peace in the society but it was a hypocrite world where peace and order got different meanings from what it was intended to be. When Jesus exposed the disorder and began to set it right, he was caught in the storm, became the centre of attention. We have tried to place Jesus within his world and now we would continue with our questions about his identity, his work and his teachings and try to answer them within this matrix of the first-century world.

## 5.2 HEAVEN WALKS ON EARTH

If I ask you, "Why did Jesus come to earth?" You would answer as simply as saying, "He came to pay the price for our sins – die on the cross – and save us from our sins and help us to get into heaven." Okay. Here's another question, "Why did Jesus die?" The answers to this question range from the perspectives of history to conservative theology. "Why would Jesus return?" "To take into heaven all of those who believe in him." Good. Now answer this question, "If the overall purpose of Jesus' birth and existence on the earth is to *die* for our sins, then why wouldn't he have simply born and died? If it was the primary purpose of Jesus, why did he live on earth? What on earth was doing?" You might think for a while and come up with this answer: "Jesus lived on the earth to show humans how to live. He lived and did ministry to give us a model of life. He lived as a very perfect human being and following his example will make us prepared very well to enter into heaven. Don't forget, he is also God. He did many things which show that he is more than a human being."

Is this all that Jesus' life is all about? If the ultimate purpose of Jesus is to die (I do not deny the centrality of Jesus' death in the New



Testament), and simply live an exemplary life, what is the point of the Gospel writers to take much time in narrating the life and ministry of Jesus? Yes, the life of Jesus was moving in the direction of his crucifixion and the whole narrative builds up in such a way to give a backdrop for Jesus' crucifixion. But that is not the *whole* purpose of his life. Well, he is the supreme model for human life but being a model was a part of his mission, not the mission itself.

When we read the biographies of Jesus against the backdrop of the Old Testament narrative, something is happening in the life of Jesus. There is something more than exemplary life. Above all, the account of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is captioned with the term *good news (or Gospel)*. News is more than a retelling of a story. It is an announcement that *something* has taken place. When we hear the ideas of the Gospel narratives, we would understand that Jesus lived like a King, inaugurating the Kingdom of God. We would also encounter a Jesus who is bringing a climax to the history of God and His people, in and through his life. Finally, we would see *heaven walking on earth* in and through the person and work of Jesus.

Jesus said in Luke 24:44 that in his life the Law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms have been fulfilled. The threefold sections that Jesus brought up are the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible (*Torah* (Instructions/Law), *Neviim* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (writings)). Jesus claimed to be the fulfilment of the Hebrew Bible (or the Christian Old Testament). This is not about some prophecies or predictions but the whole Hebrew Bible itself. This means Jesus is bringing a climax to the long narrative of God and His people. He claims to be the conclusion of it. In other words, it is a statement that the entire Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) is in the Messiah. It is not merely a statement that Jesus can be found everywhere in the Old Testament but it is a statement that the entire Old Testament could be found in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. It is not a mere understanding that the Old Testament foreshadows and the Christ is reality rather it is to say that the Hebrew Scriptures are the prelude to Jesus.

Now, let us begin to understand what is the point of Jesus' life? Who was he and what did he do? What was his life all about? We will be looking at Jesus from various perspectives to understand who he is

instead of squeezing him into a framework that we have formulated to *satisfy our narrow views*.

### 5.2.1 HERE IS THE LOYAL PARTNER

Gospel accounts of the New Testament were not mere details about his life and times. They were ancient biographies of Jesus that were written in such a way to show how Jesus was standing at the climatic point of the long story of God and His people and how he was bringing everything to the right conclusion by drawing everything to himself. He was also the loyal partner who finally accomplishes God's purposes by fulfilling the Abrahamic and the Davidic Covenant. For this discussion, let us explore the portrayal of Jesus as faithful Israel and the Davidic King.

#### 5.2.1.1 JESUS AS FAITHFUL ISRAEL

At the outset, let me say something about the fulfilment of the prophecies in the life of Jesus. Generally, it is said that these quotations from the Old Testament, especially from the prophets, in the Gospel narratives are proving the accuracy of biblical prophecy. Well, I'm not against that. But this is a view that cuts short the meaning and implications of the prophetic word to a mere prediction or some kind of foretelling. It is not simply that the prophets were merely predicting the coming of the Anointed One about where and how the Messiah will be born, live, minister and die. Although there is a predictive element in the prophecy, it cannot be limited to that narrow scope. Prophecy is more likely a visionary criticism of the existing realities and hoping for an alternative reality. In doing so, prophets *expected* and *hoped* for that reality.

When the New Testament writers were referring to the Old Testament, they were pointing out that their *vision* and *hope* is being fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. They used the material of the Old Testament beyond mere quoting. It is not only that they quoted but also simultaneously narrated the life of Jesus in a way how the narrative of Israel is presented in the Old Testament. When they quoted, they pointed out specific events in the Old Testament and described how all these are happening around Jesus himself but in a different way. When they quoted some sayings from the Old Testament text, they were referring to how Jesus is making it a reality in his own life. More than that, the Gospel writers weaved the Old Testament into Jesus' story even without making any direct quotation. In all these, we need to understand that Jesus is the

true and faithful Israel, drawing the whole narrative of the Hebrew Bible to himself and bringing it to a climactic point. This does not mean the Gospel narratives are ahistorical. They are historical accounts of Jesus but that is written in ancient patterns not simply to give a mere detail about Jesus' life but to give a more clear idea of who he is and what he is doing.

The very New Testament begins with the genealogy. Today's readers just put aside genealogy as one of the most boring parts of the Bible. Of course, it's boring and weird to us to read all those names and their families and generations. However, the point of Matthew and Luke in giving us the genealogy is not merely to show in what family Jesus was born. Matthew opens his biography of Jesus saying, "This is the genealogy of Jesus the Anointed One (Jesus the Messiah/Jesus the Christ), son of David, son of Abraham."

What is the point of this? Well, the evangelist connects Jesus back to Abraham. When it is spoken of Abraham, it does not only remind of him as the father of the Jewish nation but also a man through whose family God wanted to bless all the families of the world. This reminds us of God's partnership with Abraham against the backdrop of the nations that have betrayed Him and failed to honour His vocation. However, the seed of Abraham that is supposed to become a blessing for the nations has itself failed in the vocation that has been assigned to it. Israel had abruptly become disloyal to Yahweh and ended up in exile. It seems that God's promise to Abraham has faded off in the faithlessness of Israel.

While the audience of John the Baptizer was on the verge of being rejected as the children of Abraham, even though they are ethnically and purely of Jewish origin, because of their choices, here comes a son of Abraham, not merely a biological descendent but the one who brings the Abrahamic covenant to its consummation in and through his life. Matthew's genealogy of Jesus is divided into three parts connecting Jesus to Abraham, David and Babylonian exile showing Jesus being at the juxtaposition of them and bringing a climax to the promises of God in relation with these three. Abrahamic covenant is associated with bringing blessing and life to all the nations. Davidic covenant is associated with the kingship that represents God's reign. Babylonian exile comes with hope for a renewed partnership and a new life. Finally, Jesus brings everything to its climax in his own life. Luke traces Jesus' genealogy to Adam, the first human being, and narrates Jesus as the perfect human being who

partners with God in ruling the world and in bearing God's image.

When Jesus was born, Herod the Great plots to kill the babies of Bethlehem but Jesus is rescued. This reminds people of the tyrant Pharaoh of the Exodus who was responsible for the brutal killing of many Hebrew baby boys by throwing them to the river Nile. The same narrative builds around Jesus. But just as Moses was rescued and became a signpost for the further liberation of Israel, Jesus was rescued in the Gospel narrative. While the oppressive rulers do their best to strip the people of any hope of deliverance, God has His way to raise a leader who can liberate the people. When the babies of Bethlehem were brutally killed, Matthew quotes words of Jeremiah that were spoken in the time of exile. However, hope is sustained in times of horrific exile.

Jesus comes out of Egypt, just as Moses and Israelites had come. In his baptism, Jesus was declared to be the beloved Son of God in whom God is well pleased. This statement combines two texts in the Old Testament which speak about the Messianic King (Psalm 2:7) and the Servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 42:1). The Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 41-53 is addressed both in collective as well as in individual terms. This is to say, the Servant of Yahweh is the people of Israel as a whole who are entrusted with the vocation of Yahweh and at the same time is an individual to whom Israel must obey. If so, Jesus is the Servant of Yahweh in whom He is well pleased. He is the true Israelite who carries out the vocation of God in its complete sense without being disloyal to it. Jesus' baptism was, in one sense, accepting the vocation of God and to bring God's purposes to fulfilment.

Just as Israel who came out of Egypt journeyed through the wilderness for forty years, Jesus was led into the wilderness soon after his baptism. When we look into the narrative of Israelites' itinerary, they had gone through the times of the test. In the face of hardship, their trust in God is tested. It is not merely about trusting God's power and providence but considering God as trustworthy. They are supposed to consider their partner-God as trustworthy, reliable, stable, truthful and faithful enough to take care of His people. But Israel failed to trust God and instead they tested God's trustworthiness. However, even when God has shown His trustworthiness, they rebelled against God and considered that He is not trustworthy enough to lead them to the other side and give them the land that He has promised. Because of this distrust, the majority of Israel

had failed to enter the Promised Land and to continue their partnership with Yahweh. They ended up bearing the consequences of their own choices. Even when the people entered the Promised Land, they ended up breaking their partnership with Yahweh by making their own choices of gods and kings.

This did not happen in Jesus' case. While Israelites were tested – to be precise, while Israelites tested God – for forty years, Jesus was tested for forty days in the wilderness. The Adversary came with different options for Jesus to choose and satisfy himself. Instead of choosing to test God's trustworthiness, Jesus trusted God. We cannot simply say that Jesus refuted the Accuser by quoting from the Scriptures. But it is more than that. Jesus trusted God's words and His way of meeting the needs. Instead of testing God's trustworthiness in fulfilling His promises, Jesus chose to trust in God's reliability with all of his heart. Jesus did not steep down to choose *other gods* or the definition of power by the popular culture to become a king. He was a king but he did not choose Satan's definition of power but simply rejected the offer by completely being loyal to his vocation. In any case, Jesus did not test God for the sake of power, pleasure and popularity. He passed the test. He took the place of Israel but did not yield to the temptations of economics and politics as defined by the one who is in rebellion against God. Jesus proved himself to be the perfect partner of God in whom God can put His trust in bringing to fulfilment what he intended to do on earth.

The test and temptation of Jesus became a reality throughout Jesus' ministry. He was offered many choices but simply rejected all of them not because he cannot do it but because he *did not choose* to do it. Unlike Adam who failed to trust in God's definition of good and evil, Jesus submitted himself to the will of God throughout his life even when he was in danger of being killed.

Jesus, like Moses, gives the instructions to the people. These instructions are not merely as if he is forming a new religion, replacing the old but calling people to live the life that is exactly as in the law. But Jesus went beyond Moses in giving the right definition of the life of God's people in God's Kingdom. Jesus was a different sort of teacher. He did not simply give instructions to the people and went off in his way but lived the life that is exactly matching his teachings. He not only criticized the popular religion but lived a perfect life that corresponds to God's definition

of life as it appears in the Law and prophets of the Old Testament. He was not only a Moses-like figure but was also a true Israelite who fulfilled the law and prophets in their true sense.

In the Johannine portrait of Jesus, we see Jesus as the begotten Son of God who does the same things that His Father does. Jesus profoundly states that He can do nothing without the Father. He was the right person who finally depended on God in setting things right, that are, otherwise, messed up and dark. Jesus claims to be the light of the world which was the vocation of Yahweh's Servant. He takes the place of Israel, not to replace them but to bring their long story into climax by doing what they were supposed to do.

However, Jesus being a real and true Israel was not merely limited to doing the things that the people had failed to do but also went to the extreme of going into the horrors of exile. He bore the consequences of Israel's choices. He was handed over to the enemies and the pharaohs of his own land. Jesus also took the place of the minorities who were being crushed down by the dominant society. He experienced the injustice, cruelty and beastliness of humankind in its fullness. He was like a lamb that was brought to be slaughtered. He was put to public shame. He took the place of Israel in experiencing the shamefulness of the exile and all kinds of pain that are connected to it. He was banished from the land. He was given the most unwanted place in society. His crucifixion was his identification with the exiled ones at the same time horror of being rejected by God. Jesus' experience of exile must be seen from the perspective of the exile of the remnant of Israel who had to undergo the shame and tragedy because of the crooked choices of the majoritarian society.

At his crucifixion, Jesus forgave his enemies. It was a radical form of criticism against the *Grand Narrative* of the Jewish nation. Here, by forgiving the enemies Jesus was not only practising what he had taught but also was fulfilling what was expected from Jews in the exile. Jeremiah exhorted people in Babylonian exile to seek the welfare of their enemies (Jer. 29:7). Here, forgiveness is not the acceptance of the power and politics of injustice but a radical resistance to the violence with love instead of inclining to their actions. At the same time, Jesus experienced the horror of what it means to be rejected by God. When Jesus quotes from Psalm 22:1, he was identifying with the people like the psalmist who were going through the times when they feel that they are rejected and

unheard by God because of the injustice and enemies surrounding them. The resurrection of Jesus was not only the foretaste of the future reality but was also a fulfilment of the promised reality of a new life.

Jesus is also portrayed as a perfect human being. When Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man, it was not only a reference to the vision of Daniel but also a reference to his role as a human being. Jesus expresses humanity to its fullness. He does the things that humans have failed to do in the majority. It is not merely a sinless life in some spiritual sense. It is being humans and expressing the nature that is supposed to be found in humans. Jesus, therefore, stands as a perfect image of God mirroring the very character and nature of God which God intended to see in us.

Jesus was not merely a super-natural human who did things that no human can do. No. Jesus was the perfect human who did the things that a human is supposed to do. He did the things that humans failed (or did not want) to do. This is the reason why the later writers of the New Testament hailed Jesus as the perfect image and expression of God (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). He lived a life really what it means for humans to be in the image and likeness of God. Jesus, therefore, has become the perfect partner of God in bringing His reign and His life on earth as it is in heaven.

This is how Jesus fulfilled the vocation of Yahweh's Servant Israel to its completion. Yet this is not what Jesus' life is all about. Different other layers are yet to be explored in Jesus' life which help us to know who he was and what and why he did.

#### **5.2.1.2 JESUS AS DAVIDIC KING**

Often Christians blame the first century Jews that they expected a political messiah. Yes, they did. They did not need to expect a *spiritual saviour*. If you are ought to blame Jews for expecting a political Messiah, then you have to blame the writers of the Old Testament, the prophets and even God Himself because the very title – Anointed One – is a reference either to a king or a high priest. God made a covenant with David that he would establish his throne forever. In the exile, prophets reminded people of God's faithfulness in restoring the house of David. Psalmists too lamented and prayed for God to raise a king from David's house who is like David. If you simply say, yes, all these prophecies and promises are going to be fulfilled in the future, then what on earth was Jesus? What on earth was he doing? If Jesus was not a political Messiah, he cannot be Messiah at all.

You would ask, “why then Jesus was not accepted by the majority of Jews of his day?” The answer is not that they expected a political messiah but they expected a political messiah *on their terms*. They expected a *warrior-political-messiah*, a kind of military leader marching against Romans and overthrowing their power. They expected God to be *their* King and rival to the ones who are oppressing them. If you still do not understand what I’m trying to say, go back and freshly start reading this chapter once again. Today’s church has made Jesus a mere *religious leader* or a mere *God incarnate* who taught *new* ideas about God and formed a *new religion*. Sceptics and liberal Christians tend to make Jesus a mere *moral teacher* or a *social reformer* or *prophetic revolutionary* who taught new ethical principles to become a good person and showed us an exemplary life. Well, I don’t say all of them are wrong because all of these designations fit Jesus but what we tend to do is over-emphasize a part and ignore or completely reject the other views. Let us bring together all these pieces to get the right picture of Jesus. For now, let us focus on Jesus as Lord or King.

Once again let’s go back to Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. When the genealogy goes back to David and Abraham, it was not simply to prove that Jesus is ethnically a Jew and born in the family line of David. But it is a way of showing that the Davidic Messiah has come. The promised Davidic King has arrived. Jesus, once again, points towards God’s trustworthiness and reliability. He is the expression of God’s loyalty to His covenant even when people have failed to keep it. In Matthew, the birth of Jesus is a threat to the existing political power. When we see the magi, the wise men from the east, visiting and paying homage to Jesus, the narrative points back to Psalm 72. It was a prayer of David for his successive king in which he hopes for the kings from far away will bring gifts to the king through whom God has been reigning His people in justice and peace. While the magi try to find the new-born king in the palace of Herod, they discover him in the hometown of David, Bethlehem.

From the very beginning of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the promised Davidic King. Luke’s Gospel is narrated, in some way, in a similar fashion to the Book of Samuel. When we read the narrative of the Book(s) of Samuel, we understand that the key figure in the whole narrative is not simply Samuel but King David. The opening of the narrative is just laying the grounds of preparation in understanding who David was and what he did. In this sense, the prophet Samuel serves as a king-maker – the one



who anoints the king whom God has chosen for Himself. After the birth of Samuel, Hannah sings a song of *thanksgiving* and *hope* that culminates with the exaltation of God's anointed one (1 Sam. 2:10). In the context of the Book of Samuel, the expected anointed king would be David. This seems a bit weird. Hannah expects for God's anointed King when there is no king over Israel at all. You may either say that it is a prediction or you may consider it as mere editorial interpolation. But the fact is that it is to this point the whole narrative is being directed. Similarly, after the birth of John, Zechariah praises God for being faithful to His promises and raising a Davidic king (Luke 1:67-79).

In the Gospel of Luke, just as in 1 Samuel, there is a righteous and God-fearing couple who are childless. In both of these narratives, God grants them a son. Both Samuel and John the Baptist dedicated themselves to the service of God. Both of them criticized the existing powers and religious structures. Both of them served as forerunners and anointers of the God-appointed King. But the announcement of a new king is made even while there is someone in power, out there, running their show. This is something dangerous – announcing a new leader while there is already someone who is ruling over the people.

When we look closely into the narrative of Luke-Acts, the whole point is that Jesus is the Davidic King. When Mary was visited by the angel of God, the birth of her child is foretold as the birth of a king. The birth of Jesus was announced to the shepherds as the birth of a Davidic King. The purpose of John the Baptist was to be a forerunner of this coming king. When Jesus was brought to the temple, Simeon and Anna realized that Jesus was the promised king. Jesus travels throughout the nation announcing the Kingdom of God. In his trial before the Jewish leaders, Jesus claims to be the Messiah. The narrative of Jesus' crucifixion was like a king rejected by the nation. After his resurrection and ascension, the early followers of Jesus confess and bear witness to Jesus as the promised Davidic king. The Book of Acts ends with Paul proclaiming the Kingdom of God in Rome, right in the base of Caesar's Empire.

After her conception, Mary visits Elizabeth and sings a song of God's faithfulness in vindicating the ones who are ignored by the majority of the society and sings this song in the expectation of a delivering King. After the birth of John, his father Zechariah also praises God by foreseeing how his son would become a forerunner of the coming Messianic King.

John the Baptist prepares the people for the arrival of this Lord and His Kingdom. The baptism of Jesus was similar to the anointing of David. When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of the Lord rested upon Him from that day on. Resting of God's Spirit on someone is a part of anointing which sets apart the person as the one who brings God's purposes to the fulfilment. This is to say, an anointed king is someone who stands as a representative of God and does the things to the people that God Himself does. In other words, an anointed king is someone who acts and rules on behalf of God. Anointed ones (kings and high-priests) do not replace God but are reflections of God's actions by bearing His image.

*"...the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be ruler over his people..."* (1 Sam. 13:14)

*Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.* (1 Sam. 16:13)

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* (Mark 1:9-10)

When the Gospel writers, especially Luke, narrate that Jesus was filled by the Spirit and led by the Spirit, it was not merely because they love the *doctrine of the Holy Spirit* so much. It is a way of presenting Jesus as the Anointed One empowered by God and bringing the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) Jesus is often addressed by others as the Son of God. Whenever we encounter this term, it is taken as a proof text to say, "You see, Jesus is the pre-existent eternal Son, the Second person in the Godhead. This shows that he is God." Well, this is the systematic reconstruction of various themes in the Bible and often such systematic reconstruction blurs the meaning of the text in its context. The title 'Son of God' is a euphemism for a king, mostly applied to Davidic King. In the first century context, the title Son of God is used synonymously with the title Messiah.

The definition of Jesus' kingship happens in the wilderness when he was tempted and tested by the Accuser. Instead of bowing to Satan

to receive the kingdom and power, Jesus rebukes him. Here, this is not simply a call for worship of another divine being rather a call to accept the existing definitions of the kingdom and become in charge of the world. In one sense, this is what the majority of the nation expected in Jesus' day – a king just like anyone else, a warrior-Messiah who would launch a violent revolution against Romans and lead the triumph of Jews over them. In doing so, they domesticated the idea of a Messianic King to the patterns that are set by the world's superpowers. But Jesus was a different sort of King. He did not want to become a king as the people expected but to represent what God's Kingdom is.

The whole of Jesus' announcement was the *Kingdom of God* (or Kingdom of Heaven<sup>2</sup> in Matthew) coming on earth as it is in heaven. We, Christians of today, have spiritualized Jesus' message and interpreted the Kingdom of God as *God's reign in our hearts*. Well, that is not wrong but that is not what the message of Jesus is all about. The message is undeniably *political* in tone. To speak of someone else's reign is a very serious crime. It is simply a form of sedition or disloyalty to the existing rulers. That doesn't make Jesus apolitical when he spoke about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is precisely a political connotation, in the first century and so is now, but it is *politics of God* – Yahweh. It is a political reality that is rooted in the faith of Israel.

When Jesus was travelling throughout the Jewish nation, from Galilee in the north to Judaea in the south, announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God and having a band of followers behind him, it was not a picture of a religious leader or a moral teacher travelling throughout the land. It was more like a political movement and of course, it was. But the difference is that it was not a politics this world wanted nor was it like the politics that Jews had expected. We would discuss the definition of Jesus' politics in the next section.

Jesus did the things that a king is supposed to do. In the so-called Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16ff.), Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 and

2 Generally, Christians tend to differentiate between the terms 'Kingdom of Heaven' and 'Kingdom of God'. It is to be noted that both are different expressions of the same idea. Since Matthew's Gospel is addressed to a Jewish community, he adopts Jewish phraseology. By the late second century BC, Jews began to avoid the frequent usage of the name 'God'. Instead of using the name of God, they began to use words such as heaven, angels, Most High, etc. In this sense, when Matthew's Gospel records about the Kingdom of Heaven, it is no different from saying the Kingdom of God because both mean the same. The term simply means the reign of God.

says that the reading has been fulfilled in the hearing of the people. The passage was very densely filled with the hope of Israel and when Jesus said that it has been fulfilled, his audience gazed at him with amazement. Some have doubted that what he said would be true. But when Jesus defined his vocation as different from the vision of the people, he was rejected. But the point is the passage that expressed the work of Jesus is the work of a king empowered by God. Jesus claims to be the one who sets the captives free and announces freedom. Jesus drives out a group of demons in a man in Gerasene. The demons in the man call themselves *Legion* which is the military term. He was liberating people from the oppressing spirits and the sicknesses. Finally, when Jesus drove on a donkey into the city of Jerusalem, the crowds hailed him as a king. Later, he began to cleanse the temple that was corrupted. Cleaning the temple was an act initiated by the kings in the Old Testament. When Jesus does this, he appears as a king. Jesus does all the things as if he had all the authority to do. This is why the Jewish leaders questioned him, “With what authority are you doing all these things? Who is it that gave you the authority?” (Luke 20:2)

When Jesus was summoned by Pilate, in the Gospel of John, this Roman prosecutor questioned Jesus whether he was the King of the Jews. To him, Jesus replied that he was, in fact, a king. But he continued to state that he was not a king from this world because his kingdom was not from here. This doesn’t mean that the kingdom of Jesus is elsewhere but not on earth. This doesn’t mean that Jesus was not a king on earth. What Jesus meant here was that his kingdom was not a sort of the worldly kingdom. His kingdom is not a stereotype of the definition of power and army by this world. Yes, he is a king but his definition of kingdom and power is entirely different from the present world order – the disordered order. Jesus does not deny his kingship but denies that he was a king on the terms of this world. The astounding truth of the kingship of Jesus was puzzling to this Roman proconsul because it was not the same *truth* about the power and empire upon which his rule is based. Finally, Jesus was murdered but no one could stop him from becoming the king of Jews.

After his resurrection, Jesus commissions His disciples to go into the nations and to all of the creation and proclaim this good news. The good news in the first-century context simply means an announcement of a new ruler, a new government because of which everything is going to be changed. Jesus’ commission to his disciples was not different from

a political agenda – sending heralds to announce the inauguration of a new kingdom. Although the kingdom of God has been inaugurated on earth as it is in heaven in and through Jesus the Messiah, it would be consummated at his return. This doesn't mean that the Kingdom of God, here and now, is merely a spiritual reality. It is a reality that the church has forgotten.

While discussing Jesus within his setting, we cannot deny how the life of Jesus is narrated as a counter against the imperialism of Rome. Much could be said about how Jesus confronts the politics of the Roman Empire and how he is in conflict with Caesar's imperialism. Let's have a brief understanding of how the Gospels portray Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, as against Caesar and Roman imperialism.

***A census went wrong:*** Luke narrates that the birth of Jesus took place when Caesar Augustus issued a decree to conduct a census throughout his Empire (Luke 2:1). Romans, like any other empires, kept the records of the exact number of citizens in the Empire so that accurate taxation could take place. The census was also meant to know the number of citizens who showed allegiance to the Empire not only in sense of existence but also in the sense of obedience and acceptance. Most of the times when the censuses were taken place, Jews often responded violently against the Roman Empire. It is not only because of their political vision but also because of the imperialist oppression and taxation that brought them very low. And every time there were such protests, the powerful once silenced them by employing violent means.

The decree of the census affected the poor and lowly family of Jesus as well. Mary and Joseph went down to their hometown, Bethlehem. This was the time Jesus was born. Speaking generally, while Caesar was piloting a census to realize how many citizens are on his side, a new baby is born in a very poor family. But, this is the baby who would denounce the imperialism of Rome. This would be the person who would launch a new kingdom that would conflict with the Roman Empire.

***Two gospels in conflict:*** We have already seen briefly that Rome had already developed its own good news. The good news of the Roman Empire was that Augustus has established peace and order in the world and thus became a saviour of the world by putting an end to the long period of conflicts. The day Augustus was born was celebrated as the *beginning of the good news* and it marked the New Year.

Right in this world, there is another good news (gospel) that is echoing from the remote places of the Jewish nation. A herald, the king himself, walking through the cities and villages and announcing the arrival of the Kingdom of God which was the long-awaited hope. The birth of Jesus is narrated as good news because it was the birth of a king for whom they have been waiting for long centuries. The good news of Jesus Christ is that God is the king and He reigns the world in and through Jesus. Finally, this *good news* – a counter-narrative of Rome’s gospel – reaches the very city of Rome and a follower of Jesus proclaims it boldly without anybody’s fear.

***The double climax of history:*** While a major part of the world celebrated the climax of history with the birth of the Roman Empire because of which the *New Age* has begun. The world is not going the same as it was till now. But no sooner than the birth of the Roman Empire, a Jewish peasant, far away in the Jewish homeland, begins to announce that the history of the world has reached its climax. The new age has begun and this is the Kingdom of God. With the emergence of a new world order, the existing *world order* brought by Rome is proven to be *disorder* and *void*.

***Son of God in the city of the son of god:*** The Synoptic Gospels narrate an incident where Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” And Peter declares that he is the Messiah, the Son of God. The place is identified as Caesarea-Philippi. Caesarea-Philippi was a Greco-Roman city located in the north beyond the region of Galilee. It was a place where a temple for Augustus was built by Herod the Great in honour of Caesar. Later, the city was rebuilt and named after Caesar by Herod Philip who did this in honour of Emperor Tiberius. Therefore, the city was a centre of imperial religion and was in allegiance to Caesar. It was a place where Caesar is divinized as the son of god.

Now, Jesus comes to this city and asks his disciples about their understanding of Jesus’ identity. Suddenly there is a declaration: “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” It would be a radical criticism of the Caesarean imperialism who is already ruling over the empire. It was an attestation: “Look, the *true* Son of God – the Godlike king – is here. Caesar is simply a parody of this truth.” This claim strips the status of Caesar not only as a divine being but also of the status that he is the true ruler who brought peace and order. Such criticism of imperial ideology

does not stop here. The very beginning of Mark's Gospel opens with the words: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and ends with Jesus being enthroned over the whole world, sitting on the right hand of God (meaning, ruling as Lord God).

***Pax Romana versus Shalom:*** Augustus is celebrated as the emperor who brought peace and order. This period of peace lasted nearly two centuries. It was a time when there were almost very few conflicts between the nationalities and powers and peace was maintained in the world, especially in the Mediterranean world. Taxation and military control was a means of establishing a stable hegemony over the states that are in control of the empire. However, most of the times this *Pax Romana* is maintained by violent and oppressive means. It was protected by silencing all the protests that arose against the government. Any outcry against the empire was crushed down immediately before it threatened the peace. The protestors and revolutionaries were punished and murdered in brutal ways. Thus, *Pax Romana* is brought and maintained by violence, injustice and oppression.

Jesus, in contrast to the *Pax Romana*, was bringing *Shalom* to society. The Hebrew word *shalom* is rendered as peace. But this peace is not merely a kind of inner peace and a state of calmness. This peace includes restoration, justice, order, stability, truthfulness, forgiveness, reconciliation and joy. To say in one word, *Shalom* is the completeness and the wholeness of society. Here in the Gospel accounts, we have Jesus who is travelling throughout his homeland, offering *shalom* to the people. People are forgiven. The followers of Jesus are celebrating reconciliation and restoration into society through healing. The community is being ordered in a new way. This peace is *not of this world* which means it was not a peace that is like *Pax Romana*. The outcries are not silenced down but Jesus pays attention to the people who are forced by society to keep silent. He breaks the boundaries set by traditions and brings people back into their fellowship with society. This peace is the result of justice non-violence and liberation.

***Another Lord and Saviour:*** The emperors of Rome are venerated as lord, god and saviour. To accept Caesar as lord and god and saviour is a way of showing one's allegiance with the Empire. But there begins a revolution. The followers of a Jew who was executed by Romans claim that he is the Lord and Saviour. They boldly proclaim that he has risen

from the dead and is now Lord of the whole world. When the followers of Jesus claimed that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour, it was a direct denial that Caesar is their lord and saviour. This put them in danger of being tortured. However, the New Testament unequivocally asserts that Jesus is the Lord, God and the Saviour.

The above are just some of the glimpses to show how the Gospels narrate the life of Jesus in contrast to the claims and imperialism of Rome and its Caesars. In summary, Jesus is portrayed as the Davidic King who was anointed by God and empowered by His Spirit to bring God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus stands not merely as a religious leader or a social reformer but as a political figure who begins to set things right. However, the definition of Jesus' politics lies deeply rooted in the vision of God for humankind.

It is strange to see how both of these themes – Jesus as the Servant of Yahweh, the true Israel and as the Davidic King – combined in the life and work of Jesus. They both are conjoined in such a way that they cannot be sharply divided altogether. Jesus as the true Israel brings the whole narrative of the Old Testament to its climax and as the Davidic King, he inaugurates the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. We can see how both of these ideas are put together right with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus when he was baptized. There is a voice from heaven that said, "This is my son, the beloved (pointing to the fact that Jesus is Israel's Messiah), in whom I am well pleased (showing that Jesus was the Servant of Yahweh)." The Spirit of the Lord rested upon him just as the sign of empowerment for his vocation as the Anointed King and by the same Spirit was Jesus led to the wilderness to be tested.

### **5.2.2 A MOBILE TEMPLE**

We learnt that a sacred space/temple is a place where heaven and earth overlap one another. It is where the presence of God, the majestic glory of God is expressed among the people. This is a place where the space of God touches the space of human beings. It is the house of God on earth as it is in heaven. It is the place where God dwells with His people. The sacred space is the centre of any society in the ancient world. For Israel, the temple in Jerusalem is the visible embodiment of the presence of Yahweh among His people. It is the centre of definition. Unlike the understanding of other peoples about their gods and temples, Israel's God



does not need humans to satisfy His needs. He is not a kind of any other deities in the ancient world. He does not depend on humans to satisfy His material needs. Instead, the Presence of Yahweh itself is the source of all blessings among the people.

The temple of Yahweh is a place where the people receive forgiveness, they are declared clean of diseases, their worship is accepted and it is a place of celebration and joy. However, the scene in the time of Jesus has been radically reversed. The temple has become the definition of politics and economics of injustice. In the place which is said to be the dwelling place of Yahweh, in the place where the people pray to their God and receive answers, the religious and political leaders are running their show. The trade and commerce in this temple are some of the worst forms of religious politics. The weary are burdened even more. While the rich entertain in the temple, the poor are not so privileged to do whatever they want. The temple, now, has become the definition of economic injustice, religious oppression, and the *den of robbers*.

Now, imagine this. There is a place where one can receive forgiveness, healing and can rejoice. And that place is not a building that is established in some particular region but travelling throughout the land. People around this place are being transformed and are celebrating. This image reminds us of the tabernacle in the narrative of an exodus which is not established in one particular place but is travelling along with the people and is being erected wherever they camp in their journey. Moreover, the tabernacle was not simply travelling with the people but also leading the people towards the place where finally God and the people can dwell together. The tabernacle, therefore, is the embodiment of Yahweh's glorious presence that journeys along with the people and dwells among them.

This is the picture that we get in the Gospel narratives. Jesus travels throughout the land administering healing, forgiveness and celebration to the people. To the ones who followed him, it was like God of Israel has embodied Himself in the person of Jesus. It was like the tabernacle revived once again. But this time not in the form of a tent but the form of a person. The glory of Yahweh is expressly manifested in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. It was as if Israel's God had finally returned to the people and their land but in a different form. His glory is no longer limited to the building structures of a temple.

When Jesus was healing the people and forgiving sins, it was not to prove his divine nature. In the Book of Leviticus, chapters 11-16 define the sanctity of the people around the tabernacle. These are the instructions about ritual purity. There it lists out several diseases and bodily discharges to define what is clean and what is unclean. Here, uncleanliness doesn't mean sinfulness; rather it refers to the state of a person's inability to interact with the tabernacle or with the rest of the society because of the uncleanliness. One cannot enter into the presence of God with ritual impurity although it is a general sickness that anyone can go through. Sometimes these diseases were chronic and therefore the sick persons are told to live outside the camp. One thing must be understood that these ritual laws are ancient and made sense to the ancient people more than they make sense to us.

While the unclean are isolated from society and the presence of God, they can be restored once they are declared as *clean* by the high priest. The Day of Atonement is not merely for the forgiveness of an individual's sins but also to *reboot* society. On that day, the whole congregation of God's people is purified of all the ritual impurities that had occurred throughout the year and gave a fresh start to the people. This supposed to happen every year but there is less evidence that it had ever occurred.

However, by the time of Jesus, most of these ritual laws were interpreted in legal terms. They were overemphasized than what they meant. Because of the vigorous religious fundamentalism, people began to domesticate the Mosaic Law as a means to become rigid. The humanitarian concern for the sick and being compassionate towards the weak and vulnerable was almost absent. The instructions that were given to keep the sanctity of the sacred space are now being interpreted in the terms of legalism and as a *proof text* to be indifferent to the sick and weak in the society. People are being treated as if they are supposed to behave like robots that are programmed with the codes of legalism. This is why Jesus vehemently criticized the traditions of the ancestors observed by the religious heads of his day.

This is the time when Jesus broke with the traditions. Jesus' breaking with the traditions does not mean that he was against the Mosaic Law. He had to redefine God's vision for the society within the Hebrew Scriptures that transcend the ritual norms that are being overly emphasized above the intentions of God. Jesus, therefore, did not go against his Bible but

against the legalistic interpretation of the Jewish Bible.

Jesus crossed the boundaries defined by the legal heads. He touched the lepers. He showed compassion to the people who are suffering from sickness and being oppressed by *foreign* spirits. When Jesus began to heal the people, he was making them clean and restoring them to their society and the Presence of God. He was bringing life to the lifeless. He gave comfort to the weary and heavily burdened. When Jesus was forgiving the people, it was also a sign that he is the embodiment of the temple and has the authority to forgive the sins of the people. The same things that are supposed to be available in the temple are available at Jesus. There is forgiveness, healing and celebration around him. It was as if God had pitched His tent among the people in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah.

### 5.2.3 GOD OF ISRAEL RETURNS

A majority of Christians are divided in their understanding of the person of Jesus. While liberals are sceptical of Jesus' portrayal in the New Testament saying that the Jesus we see in the New Testament writings is a Jesus reconstructed by his early followers who wanted to hail him as God and Lord. In their so-called quests for the *historical Jesus*, the liberal sceptic scholars have concluded that the New Testament Gospels are *forged* and *mythologized* Jesus and formed a cult of worshipping Jesus. They also concluded that the Gospels in the New Testament are influenced by the way the Roman Empire venerated its emperors as lords and gods. Thus, for these liberals, Jesus is merely a moral teacher, a prophet, a revolutionary but never the embodiment of God as portrayed in the Gospels. For them, the *historical Jesus* never worked miracles, never rose from the dead and never the Lord of all the earth. All of such reconstruction of Jesus is simply like imposing post-modern philosophy and post-modern scepticism upon the first-century narratives. However, we can add this legacy to their account: They contributed a lot in the studies of the socio-political and historical *matrix* within which Jesus lived.

The conservative fundamentalists, on the other hand, unequivocally shout that Jesus is God. He is the divine being, God the Son – the second person of Godhead – who came down to earth, did the miracles, died and rose again. However, the problem with this group is they *dehistoricize* Jesus

from his Jewish roots. This Jesus is never a revolutionary, this Jesus is never a loyal Israel, this Jesus is never the political Messiah and never *earthly* and concerned for the *earthly people*. This reconstruction of Jesus is purely based on the creeds developed by post-Nicene Christianity. The problem with those creeds is that they ignored the meaning and message of Jesus in his own time and space for the sake of their debates to understand the personality of Jesus. They overly *spiritualized* Jesus. While these debates between liberals and conservatives go on, let us hear from the Gospel writers to know what they are trying to communicate.

Some decades after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, one of his disciples, who claims to be the beloved disciple, pens down an account of the life of Jesus to address the people's crises and questions. He opens his work with a beautiful poem to introduce who was Jesus and what he did. He chooses the vocabulary that is pregnant with heavy theology to explain what his work is all about. The book opens with a similar language that one encounters on the first page of the Hebrew Bible. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Many times this verse is taken as a proof text to either to defend Jesus' divinity and pre-existence or to defend the Trinitarian doctrine. However, the theology of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, as we have it in the first eighteen verses, is much more than the proof text of Jesus' divinity or the doctrine of Trinity.

The opening of the Gospel of John takes us to the scene of creation where God created, ordered and perfected the world that was dark, disordered and chaotic. The very Word of God by which everything has been created is personified as a separate from God yet God Himself just as the speech of a person cannot be divided from the speaker. Let us try to focus on the theology that is brought up here. In the beginning, there was darkness and chaos, the land was wild and waste covered with the waters and there the life begins. God speaks and the light comes. The light, in John's Gospel, is used as a metaphor for the expression of God's character, His life and the world that is ordered and defined by Him. The light and life of God encountered the darkness and chaos and brought order, perfection, goodness and life on the earth.

The writer goes on to say that this very creative and reviving Word of God embodied in the human person and dwelt among us. He conveys the idea of God's coming into the space of humans which reminds us of

the scene of the tabernacle and the temple. The author makes a profound statement of a witness saying, “We have seen his glory...” (John 1:14). The message, once again, is that Israel’s God has come in person. The glory (*doxa*) of God – the immediate and heaviness of God’s very presence – has finally come into the temple but this temple is no longer a rigid structure but a walking and speaking human being who goes on to create new things, open the eyes, regenerate people, bring the resurrection and life, set the things right, and reign the world. It was as if the God of Israel or the creative Word of God came to dwell with the people in the person and being of Jesus which was like heaven coming down to earth. The very character of God is revealed through this Son who was in the bosom of the Father.

It was as if the Creator God is stepping into the world once again to set things right, to drive out the darkness that has enslaved the people and to create a life in the world that happened to live in the shadow of death because of its own choices and their consequences. This is how the Beloved Disciple of Jesus narrates what Jesus’ life is all about. These are not simply exaggerated claims to venerate Jesus as a divine being nor are these mere philosophical words to address the philosophers but a language that is pregnant with different themes that run through the Hebrew Bible and the assurance that what they have seen and experienced in the person of Jesus. Life was radiating through Him and their *future* is here and now. Everything that Israel has hoped for to happen in the future – eternal life, resurrection, judgement, peace and new creation – is all here, becoming a reality right now in the person and work of Jesus. It is the *Realized Eschatology*, as some scholars term it.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is introduced as *Immanuel* – God with us. It is an attestation that in the person of Jesus the God of Israel is with the people. This theme of *God in Christ* is very dominant throughout the New Testament. When Matthew employs these words, he was not merely pointing out Jesus’ divine nature but pointing out the promises of Yahweh for which people have waited for a long time to be fulfilled. It was the promise of Yahweh’s return to the people. This theme further develops in the words of John the Baptist where he speaks of a *new exodus* that is going to begin. If we look back to the narrative of the exodus event in the Book of Exodus, we would know that it was not merely a liberation from slavery but is strongly associated with the covenant and the presence of God dwelling among the people. Then, when John the Baptist evokes the

theme of *new exodus* it also points out the *new covenant* and the *glory of Yahweh dwelling among the people*. Based on this understanding, we could see how Jesus is the embodiment of Israel's God coming and dwelling among the people. Jesus can also be seen as the one who *renewed* the covenant as promised by Yahweh through His servants the prophets.

Christians today, although not everyone, are satisfied with defining Jesus as the God-manifest. If it was the definition in the first century, there could be not much difficulty for people to accept that. But the real question, then, is *which* God is this? The answer would not be that there are three persons in Godhead and one of them has come. The right answer would be saying that God of Israel, Yahweh, has returned in the person of Jesus.

Jesus did the things that only Yahweh could do. What Yahweh said that He would do is now becoming reality in Jesus. Because of the system in which we live, we tend to think that because Jesus did the things that only God could do, it is proof that he is God. But let me say once again, speaking in the first-century mindset, it is not the matter of whether Jesus is God or not but the matter is *what* God is expressed in Jesus? *What sort of God is Jesus?* Therefore, when the Gospel writers are pointing out to say that Jesus is doing the things that only God could do, they are saying that Jesus is doing the things only Yahweh could do and therefore Jesus is the embodiment of Yahweh.

Jesus forgave the sins just like Yahweh. When Jesus instituted the new covenant it is as if Yahweh is renewing His covenant with His people just as He promised that He would do. When Jesus rode on a donkey into the city of Jerusalem, the Gospel writers quoted from Zechariah 9:9 which is about Yahweh's victorious return to Jerusalem after defeating the enemies. Jesus claims to be the Lord of the Sabbath. John has a bunch of things to say about this topic. He has Jesus bringing life to the dead and Jesus defining Himself as the source of life. Jesus claims to be the Good Shepherd. He claims to be the judge of the nations. He breathes a new life into his followers. All of these things are the functions of Yahweh and the things that Yahweh has promised to do by Himself.

All of the four Gospels narrate to us about Jesus' cleansing of the temple. It was quite a *normal* day in the temple. Since it was a season of festival, the money exchangers and animal and bird traders flocked into the temple courtyards doing their business and exploiting the

people. Suddenly Jesus rushes into the temple in great disappointment and anger. He begins to turn out the tables of the money exchangers and drives out all the traders out of the scene. One could imagine the faces of those traders and temple officials that turned red, enraged and astonished at the actions of Jesus yet witnessing all this spellbound – as if they are dumb. Jesus quotes and combines two scripture texts (Isa. 56:7 and Jer. 7:11) saying that *His house* has become the den of robbers rather than a house of prayer. Although Jesus makes a quotation, he quotes it as if the temple was *his house*. We know the temple in Jerusalem is considered as the house of God of Israel. Here, Jesus claims the temple to be his house and his attitude towards the traders was as if he is driving out the robbers out of his house while no one is brave enough to question Jesus' words and actions. It is as if the Master of the Temple is coming to reclaim back what belongs to Him.

Moreover, the story of Jesus is told as the continuation of the story of Israel's God. We are quite happier to hear that Jesus is "God" – God of our imagination – rather than hearing that Jesus is the embodiment of Israel's God. Israel's God is not very interested in picking up some souls and take them to a different place. God of Israel is not someone too distant and indifferent to people living in a remote place and not allowing people to approach Him. He is not such a God. Israel's God is someone who *journeys with the people*. He is the one who creates new things. He treads on the disordered and imperfect world and comes into it to bring order and perfection. God of Israel is more concerned about *humans, justice, compassion and equity*. He makes a covenant with people and lives with them – not taking up them into His space. Israel's God is affected by the politics, economics, religion and society of the people and wants to create a new society with His definition of politics and economics. He is *a different sort of God* – then and now. Israel's God is very different from our definition of *God*.

It is this God who is embodied in Jesus Christ. If Jesus is God, he is not a sort of God as we define Him. Many times, we try to differentiate between the works of Jesus as divine and human. We put Jesus' miracles, healings and teachings in the account of his divine nature and other things such as his birth, hunger, death, etc. into account of his human nature. However, the divine nature of Jesus is expressed more in his humanity even in his death. In other words, Jesus' humanity is the definition of Jesus' divinity. Because Jesus is not the embodiment of our systematically

constructed definition of “God” but is the personification of Israel’s God in whom we are very less interested. A majority of today’s church is worshipping an *imaginary Jesus* who is an embodiment of an *imaginary God* someone very different from God and Jesus we find in the Bible.

#### 5.2.4 JUBILEE YEAR ONCE AGAIN

The times and seasons defined by the instructions of Yahweh in the Sinaitic covenant are radically creating a new vision of the society. The practice of these times and seasons creates a society that breaks with the societies all around Israel. Yahweh’s definition of time is a definition of an alternative society that stands different and unique in the ancient world. When the essence of this definition is practised by people today, the world would become a better place. For a while, let us discuss the times and seasons defined by Mosaic Law and see how Jesus was bringing all of them to its consummation.

Sabbath is a day of rest every week. On this day, the people are supposed to pause their work. This is a break from the definition of life and works by Egypt. Sabbath is a break from the anxious labour that the people had experienced in Egypt as being slaves. This is a definition of the society where the people are not anxious about their engagements but simply take a day off for rest and celebrate with the family. Humans are called to do work from the very beginning. It is not right for humans to be lazy and lethargic. But the work is considered as a gift of God but not a demon that enslaves the people ceaselessly making them anxious about their life. Although a curse is associated with labour, it is about the pain and frustration that is associated with the work. Amid these anxieties, busyness, pain and disturbance, people find a day of rest that restores their health, their family and their life in the society of God.

Slaves in the community of Israel were supposed to be liberated after six years of their work under someone. This is to show that the slaves are not the property of their masters. Masters are not supposed to exercise tyranny over their slaves and make them anxious about their duty. Moreover, the Sabbath is also for the slaves and resident foreigners. After every six years, the agricultural land must be left free. This is to show that the land which was given to the people is not for them to exercise their mastery over it, ceaselessly sowing and reaping. They are but stewards of the land. The fruit of the land that is grown in this year on its own is left



for the poor in the society and the beasts of the land. This year of rest is called Sabbatical year. It is a year when the people express their faith in God that they are but stewards of the land that is given to them, not the mere owners of it.

Jubilee year is the Sabbath of the Sabbatical years. It is observed after every seven sabbatical years i.e., the fiftieth year. This is a year of restoration – a restoration of socio-economic conditions of the people. The debts that are not yet paid are forgiven. Everyone's land is restored to them if it was sold or given to lease. Slaves are released. Thus, the Jubilee year is a time that transforms the society of Israel into a society of peace, liberty, restoration and forgiveness. The principal observations of the Jubilee year can be summarized as below:

- a. Each person is to live as a free human.
- b. People are to own their own land.
- c. Everyone in the society is to be united with and bound in obedience to Yahweh who liberated them.<sup>3</sup>

This is God's definition of time and the vision of Yahweh to form a society of freedom, equity and forgiveness. It is a time when people enjoy the *favour of their God*. When this *time* is observed without a failure, it would be nothing but heaven becoming reality on earth. It is as if the space of God and the space of humans have come together which brings peace and unfathomable joy. This is Yahweh's vision for the society where the burden, slavery and disorder carried out of the scene.

But, in practice, it seems that this has never happened. No one in society really wants the slaves to be freed because the dominant society wants them to be enslaved so that they can enjoy their life at the cost of others. Majority of the society do not want to forgive the debts of others because when they do so, it stops them from becoming rich. It is not that the debtors can be quiet and lazy without attempting to meet their debts. There are strict commandments given by God for everyone to pay back what they have borrowed in the due time. But there are also times when the *real poor* in the society fail to pay back their debts. Usually, the creditors will enslave their debtors when they fail to meet the debts incurred and

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3        Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983), 218.

thus they do not want to forgive the debts. People are anxious about their work, they are striving to make income by any means even if the methods of money-making are unjust and cruel.

By the time of Jesus, the Sabbath itself has become a cruel master over the people. It was not because the Sabbath is evil in itself but the way the legalistic leaders of Jewish society interpreted the Sabbath has made it a burden to the people. They began to value the observance of the Sabbath over the practice of compassion and justice. This is a parody of God's definition of Sabbath and other times. The prophets envisioned a *time* when the Sabbath and jubilee year is realized in society. In the narrative of Luke-Acts, we see how Jesus is bringing the jubilee year once again in society and how it affected the people's living. In the Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:18-19), Jesus declares his mission based on Isaiah's text which is very likely a promise of the jubilee year. It is good news to the poor, a time of liberation for those who are captives and the proclamation of the year of Yahweh's favour.

Jesus began to be compassionate over the people. He forgave people's sins. The oppressed are being released and they are restored to society. People are no longer burdened with the laws and traditions that are defined by religious leaders. Although the law was not evil in itself, the way it was presented by the leaders made it burdensome to be practised. Jesus emphasized love and compassion as the means to live in society. Jesus interpreted the law of the Old Testament in the terms of love and compassion and summarized the entire law as loving God and loving neighbours.

When the jubilee year was being realized in and through Jesus, it was as if a whole new thing was being created and a new creation was coming up on the scene. In the Book of Acts, we see the early church as really practising this. All the rich and poor in the church are coming together. There is equity, justice, freedom and forgiveness in the community of Jesus. People serve one another with a pure heart. This is to say, the early followers of Jesus constituted a society, not an institution, which corresponds to the vision of God for humankind.

### 5.3 REVOLUTIONARY TEACHINGS

Jesus is celebrated as the best teacher in the world. Countless leaders and the common people are inspired and challenged by his teachings. His teachings have transformed many lives and many are being transformed even today. Some call him the *Guru* par excellence. Some call him the greatest *Sage*. Some consider his teachings as the highest definition of humanity and ethics. Some consider them as a definition of a new religious movement. Some define them as prophetic words. And the majority of Christians consider Jesus' teachings as God's Word and many see them as *principles of how to get into heaven*.

Although all of them are right, they are not complete in themselves. What was the point of Jesus' teachings? A definite answer to this question would be 'Kingdom of God.' However, the teachings of Jesus were not boring lectures in his day. Whether he told a small parable or spoke continuously for long hours and days, they were *revolutionary*. The teachings of Jesus pierced into the hearts of the people not because he told beautiful stories but because they evoked the imagination of the hearers and they are invited to contemplate on what they have heard from him.

We cannot make any sharp distinction between the teachings of Jesus and his life. Jesus was not like many of the speakers today whose life is different from what they speak – they do not have belief in what they teach in the public. He spoke what he believed and he acted what he had taught. In other words, when Jesus was making claims and teachings that made him the centre of criticism by scholars of his day, his actions made him even more suspicious as if he had all the rights to do whatever he spoke. He spoke everything in the light of what he was doing actually. Thus, Jesus' teachings were more than that of a *Guru*, more than a *scholar* and more than a *conventional rabbi*. Therefore, when we speak of Jesus' teachings, we are also speaking about what he was doing actually. In this section, we would have a brief exploration of Jesus' teachings and their relevance in his world and ours.

#### 5.3.1 A MERE MORAL TEACHER? STORY-TELLER?

Both liberal, as well as conservative evangelical Christians, are satisfied with calling Jesus one of the *greatest moral teachers* ever lived in history. The whole of Jesus' teachings, especially Sermon on the Mount, is the supreme definition of human ethics and by which humans ought to

live. Jesus' teachings elevated the ethics of humankind to the cloud-level. They are the principles for every Christian and every individual human being to live a truthful, honest and moral life. They also teach us how to get into heaven.

Well, that would be pretty of Jesus. He is a very nice guy who taught humans about what to do and what not to do. "He gave standard guidelines for humans to live a very good life. What about that saying, 'Do to others as you want them to do to you'? It's a golden rule. He also taught about a personal relationship with God. He taught about having a pure heart." What about the commandments in the Old Testament? "Well, they are very ancient, disturbing, distorting and outdated. People don't understand them. But see, Jesus has given a very module for Christian life. Yes, they are difficult to practice but they are very meaningful and effective."

It is not untrue that Jesus is the best moral teacher in the world. Yes, he is. But when we try to generalize Jesus' teachings into a set of moral standards for human life and a module for practising personal relationship with God, it would be something like keeping a cup outside in the rain and waiting for all the raindrops to fall into this tiny vessel rather than watering the whole ground. When we define the teachings of Jesus as simply an ethical code for humanity, we are pushing Jesus into a narrow space and understanding him on our terms rather than on his terms.

Jesus did not teach some new kind of ethics but redefined what is already there from the perspective of God's compassion. Jesus was not merely speaking about one's personal relationship with God. Although he taught that, it was not a call for the personal pietism unconcerned about the socio-economic and moral issues existing in the society. He was not even giving an idea of God who is very near to the people. There is a wrong conception in many of the Christians today that God in the Old Testament is a very distant God while God in the New Testament has become very close to the people. Well, if you have a clear understanding of the Hebrew Bible, you would never make such a presumption that God in the Old Testament is a distant God. Yes, there are instructions about the priesthood, there are restrictions of entrance into the sacred space. But that does not mean that He is distant and indifferent. Yahweh lived among people, attentive to their issues and trying to solve the things

through the persons He has appointed. He is so close to the people and so closer that they always wanted God to be among them and they always wanted to witness the presence of God in their land. Therefore, Jesus did not merely define God in terms of immediacy but also in terms of God's character of love and compassion. Moreover, Jesus taught about God to explain what he was doing.

The teachings of Jesus are the reinterpretation of the vision of Yahweh in the Old Testament that is expressed through His instructions and commandments. Jesus redefined them because they were been legalized by the religious leaders and because people have become like machines pre-coded with the *legalistic programming language* without any humanitarian concern. While the teachings of the religious leaders of Jesus' day contributed to creating a society that is stagnant, indifferent and heartless, Jesus' interpretation of the same Scriptures gave life to society.

An alternative society is envisioned in the teachings of Jesus. The difference with Jesus is that he inaugurated that *alternative society* – a society of compassion, righteousness, justice, peace and right relationship with God and humans. While Yahweh's vision in the Hebrew Scriptures remained a theory because there was almost nobody who practised in its complete sense, Jesus began to live that vision. He not only taught but lived like what he had expected from the people. This is to say, it was as if Jesus is standing in the place of Yahweh or as His representative in framing a vision for the new creation. More than that, Jesus became the embodiment of Yahweh's vision and Yahweh himself in bringing life and light into the society that is broken down and victimized to the consequences of its own choices. This is why the Gospel writers celebrated Jesus as *God with us*.

Jesus *demythologized* the understanding of God. He critically attacked the theology framed by the religious leaders that portrayed God as a *policeman* or a *cruel judge* who would punish people if they fail in following the traditions and laws that are defined by them. While the Hebrew Bible presented a *different sort of God* from all other deities in contemporary religions, the legalistic traditions have made him *no different* from other gods. They not only made God as someone authoritarian but also showed themselves in such a way. Even the *day of rest* has become more burdened. Compassion is considered less important than strictly sticking to the laws. In such a setting, Jesus revealed God

as *compassionate* in and through his very life and teachings.

The ethics of Jesus is the ethics of the Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew). They are the principles of the life of God's people in the Kingdom of God. Jesus' teachings and his life were the expressions of what it looks like when God is the King or in-charge of the world. Yes, of course, God is the true Lord over the world but at the same time, He has chosen a people to be His Kingdom, in particular, to show how the world would look like when all the nations submit themselves to the rule of God instead of running the show on *their* terms.

Often, Jesus taught by the means of parables. Parables are simple stories designed to tell a profound truth. Jesus used the parables and imageries according to the setting of his audience. The parables will indeed help people to retain the message of Jesus for a long period. Synoptic Gospels record a great number of Jesus' parables which are told as stories even to the children of Christian homes. But teaching everything in parables did not make Jesus a mere story-teller who would attract people by telling stories.

Suppose if a person comes to Jesus to hear his teachings. Jesus simply told some stories to his hearers. When this person sits before Jesus and hears a lot of stories and returns home, he would not tell his wife and children, "Hey, you know, this guy Jesus is a very good story-teller. He taught a very good moral story today. It was so pleasant to hear that one. Tomorrow, I'm going to take you along with me. Let's hear his stories together." The actual scene is a reversal of this. The person would go home with a face of astonishment. The story that he has heard that day disturbs him, making him think of it again and again. A river of thoughts run through his mind critically analysing the meaning of Jesus' parable.

Parables of Jesus were not mere stories. Often it is told that the parables of Jesus are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. But they are more likely heavenly stories with earthy meanings. The parables are all about explaining what God is beginning to do on earth and especially in and through Jesus.

Parables often evoked the thoughts of the people. Some felt offended and some even tried to plot against Jesus just because of the parable that they had heard from him. All of the parables were having one meaning. They are not to be exaggerated so heavily that they lose their meaning.

Parables of Jesus exposed the realities of the society from the perspective of God – the God of Israel. Society went too far from the vision of God for His people. Therefore, the stories of Jesus raised questions in the hearts of the hearers. Sometimes they are breath-taking too. But no one can question Jesus because they knew that is what was happening in society with their religion and with their attitude towards the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus spoke of the parable of the Good Samaritan, it was a sharp criticism of the legalism of the Jewish religion that made them really heartless and blind enough to realize who their neighbour is and what they are supposed to do. When Jesus says that it is Samaritan (one of the most downgraded classes of the society whom Jews considered as *outcastes* and *untouchables*) who comes to rescue a person on verge of death, it was an attack against the questioner (a religious teacher) himself who wanted to prove his excellence in law. When Jesus spoke of the parable of Prodigal Son, it was a harsh criticism against the Jewish *pious* leaders who were not very happy when some *unacceptable ones* are restored to their fellowship with God and others. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus was an attack against those rich in the society who are self-satisfied with their wealth and power and never trying to render justice to the poor in the society being deaf to Moses and Prophets (meaning *Torah* and *Neviim* of the Hebrew Bible).

Therefore, Jesus was neither a *mere* moral teacher nor a *mere* storyteller. His teachings have much to do with more than a call for *internal purity* and righteousness. Jesus did not teach any new systematic theology or ethics about how to pray, live a good life, have a personal relationship with God and to become righteous. The emphasis of Jesus was not merely upon internal righteousness. Many of the times Jesus spoke in individualistic terms but that does not mean he was calling people for a pietistic life. Jesus taught the aggregate ideas in singular terms. The ultimate vision of Jesus' teachings is not merely about *individuals* who are simply leading an ethical life but a vision for the society with restored relationships, justice, peace and order. This is to say when each individual gets affected by the teachings of Jesus it would heal the society as a whole. It is like the word about the Kingdom sown in a perfect soil which would bring a hundredfold result. The ultimate vision of Jesus is to create *an alternative society* beginning with himself, which exactly expresses what it means to have God to be their King. It is not about preparing people for the Kingdom of God but inaugurating the Kingdom of God.

## 5.3.2 POLITICS OF COMPASSION AND SERVICE

We seldom hear Jesus *was* a political Messiah. Everything that we commonly hear is about an *apolitical* (politically neutral) Messiah. If we say Jesus is the King we either refer to him as a transcendent and sovereign ruler who is above everyone or in very individualistic terms saying Jesus is the Lord of my heart and I have surrendered everything to him. More than that we tend to make Jesus the King of a *future* world but not of our own. For today's church, Jesus is more like a *spiritual* Messiah who came to save the spirits of the people from eternal hell. This is an utter reversal of the picture that we get in the pages of the Bible.

If Jesus is the spiritual king, well, he is a spiritual Messiah whose spirituality affected the politics, sociology and economics of his world. It was a kind of spirituality that is more earthly, more humane and more transforming. It is a kind of spirituality that is deeply concerned about earthly humans. It is a spirituality that sets things right. Yes, Jesus is spiritual but his definition of spirituality is not as of our own. He is not the one on our terms but he is on his terms and his lordship.

We have done a lot to reduce Jesus to a *religious figure* or a *simply divine* which just depoliticizes him to a shallow understanding of him as a founder of a new religion or a new faith. And we are satisfied with that because we want him on the safest side in order that we might not be challenged by his way of politics.

The Jesus who defers to empire, however, is rooted in a Jesus who has been reduced to merely a religious figure. Since by definition empire is political, a Jesus who is merely religious has no relevance to or implications for empire. Moreover, the contexts in which Jesus operated, both in ancient Palestine and in the larger Roman Empire, are similarly depoliticized since with Jesus we are dealing only with a figure that stands at the origin of one religion from another, the emergence of Christianity from Judaism.... Assuming that Jesus is appropriately categorized as a religious figure, we more or less ignore the political-economic aspects and implications of Jesus' preaching and practice.<sup>4</sup>



In all respects, we cut down the political message of Jesus and make him wingless because the notion of Messiah is deeply rooted within the political aspirations of Israel's God. The very slogan of Jesus – Kingdom of God – is purely political but it is the politics of heaven. It is a political system that is founded on the vision of Yahweh for the whole world. For a while, let us keep aside our spectacles of speculating Jesus on our terms and try to understand the way Jesus defined the politics of the Kingdom of God.

For Jesus, the political ideology of the Kingdom of God is about compassion, justice and service. Jesus, who himself was both a herald as well as the King of the Kingdom, walked throughout the land of Israel healing people, casting out demons and announcing the good news that God is becoming the in-charge of the world bringing the long history of the politics of blood, tyranny, injustice and beastliness to its climax. He went on liberating the people, giving life to the dead, restoring people to the society, restoring the lives of the lost ones, and bringing peace and order. This is all about the standards of Jesus' politics.

Jesus did not merely teach about compassion and justice but began to do it in practice as if he has all the rights to sort things out. Generally, it is the rulers who are in the position of rendering justice and bringing peace and order to the Kingdom. When Jesus was announcing that God had become the King, he was making such an announcement in light of what he was doing in society.

Jesus reversed the political vision of eye-for-eye justice and introduced a justice of turning-the-other-cheek. In a world that has taken the retributive (punishment) principles for granted and creating a society that is full of disorder and violence, Jesus introduced a justice of resistance and forgiveness. By resistance, it refers to the disagreement with the definition of power by the dominant society. It is a break with the popular culture and cultivating a culture that is non-violent in its terms. Loving the enemies is a radical form of criticizing that the principles and definitions of power by the world are illusions because they do not create a stabilized society but turn the world into a history of bloodshed and warfare. Forgiving the enemies and caring them, when they deserve the worst to be happened, is the best way of bringing an end to the long history of conflicts and disputes.

I think you have got a question here, “Well, that wasn’t the character of God in the Old Testament. Wasn’t He always recommending the people to punish, kill or retaliate?” It seems so. But when we reread the Old Testament from the covenant perspective, we see Yahweh’s vision for a society where things are right and ordered always with a very less need of taking hard measures. God in the Old Testament was not inclined to violence as many portray Him. He was more compassionate, slow to anger and overflowing with loyal love and faithfulness which was expressed even in the face of punishment and shame. Instead of making some generalized statements, we need to remember the world of Jesus within which his words and actions become more meaningful. The Jewish nation was a stereo-type of Jonah who never wanted God to love the enemies. What the people were expecting was God to come on their side, keeping all the flaws within themselves, and destroy their enemies, Romans. Jesus reverses their national narrative here by demonstrating the politics of a compassionate God who is equally concerned about everyone.

The politics of compassion taught by Jesus is deeply rooted in the compassionate character of God. Jesus could summarize the whole of God’s character with the single word ‘compassion’ and he taught that the compassion of this God demands the compassion of His people (e.g. Luke 6:36). Where on earth did Jesus get the idea that the God of Israel is compassionate? No doubt that such a definition of God’s character by Jesus is based on his Bible. It’s from the Hebrew Bible itself, the part of our Bible which we call the Old Testament. He did not introduce a new character of God nor did come up with a *new theology* about a *new God* who is different from the God of Israel. What then is the meaning of the word compassion in Jesus’ Bible – the Old Testament? What does Jesus mean when he was saying that the whole of God’s relation to His people can be summed up with the word compassion?

The word *rachum* is translated as compassion or mercy in the Old Testament. It means a mother’s love for the child of her womb. Hebrew Bible employed different other words such as *racham*, *chanun*, *chesed* and others to express a similar idea. To summarize all those, the word compassion refers to a mother’s love for her child, especially when the child is vulnerable to danger. It is a motherly attitude towards a child who is insecure and victimized by the powers and forces that try to devour it. There are also times when the word compassion is used in the sense of *sparing from danger*. (E.g. Ex. 2:6; 1 Kings 3:26). Yahweh used such

a word to define His character (Ex. 34:6). Therefore, when it is said that Yahweh is compassionate or merciful, it refers to His concern for the people who are vulnerable to the dangers – the dangerous powers that could extinguish them. He *feels* the pain of His people and takes that hurt so serious to be neglected. He strives to show favour upon the people who are unworthy and ignored by the majority of society. His mercy is associated with His generous, loyal and active love that takes on the side of the vulnerable ones to spare them from the attacks. This is what Jesus meant when He said that God is compassionate and merciful. This is one of the reasons why Jesus presented God as the *Father*.

Jesus made such radical and revolutionary claims about God within his milieu where the leading classes of the Jewish society defined God either as too *legally bound* to be compassionate or too *indifferent* to spare the people from the claws of the socio-political structures. For them, the *legalism* and *indifference* of this God is the foundation for their legalism and indifference that is expressed in their attitude towards others. This is the basis for their hindrance to forgive their enemies and to accept the unacceptable ones even if they are ready to repent.

In such a setting, Jesus broke with society's definition of Israel's God to redefine and order the things in society. Jesus defined Israel's God as compassionate, merciful and gracious. And based this definition of God as the definition of politics in society. This is not a new definition but the definition that is buried in the definition by the leaders of Jesus' day. He directly quotes from Hosea 6:6 at least twice in Matthew 9:13 and 12:7. There is an indirect allusion to the same in Mark 12:33.

When Yahweh returns to the people, He would not establish a kingdom that is no different from the rest of the kingdoms in the world. We should not differentiate between Jesus' definition of the Kingdom and his actions. Jesus as the Messiah was not merely representative of the Kingdom of God but the King Himself. Do not forget what we have discussed previously that the fullness of the God of Israel is embodied in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus also delegates his authority to his disciples sending them to the villages of the land of Israel to heal the sick, cast out the demons and to announce the good news that God is in charge of the world (Matthew 10). When Jesus defines the politics of God's Kingdom as healing the sick and casting out the oppressing demonic spirits, he was communicating

that compassion is the character of God. Healing of the sick and casting out demons was not a mere demonstration of the divinity of Jesus but they stand as definition to the character of God defined within the person and work of Jesus as a God who is compassionate – who takes the pain and hurt of the people very serious when they are neglected by the rest of the powerful ones in the society.

Jesus sympathized with the people. He was not indifferent to the cries of those who needed immediate response to their state of dysfunctionality. He was not partial in his attitude. He was not merely supporting the poor and needy and invading the powerful society but was calling the powerful ones to render justice and do what is right. It is a call to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Jesus was in a setting when the cries of those who cried for compassion were abruptly silenced (Mark 10:47-48). It was a time when no one took the pain seriously. They were too *otherworldly* to consider their neighbours who are in pain. They are too *luxurious* to meet the needs of those who are lying before the doors of their houses. They are too *busy* to have compassion. Jesus breaks such definition of politics to inaugurate *another* Kingdom – an alternative kingdom that is an inclusive, compassionate and non-majoritarian style of ruling. Jesus shows compassion towards a Roman centurion's servant – the servant of their enemies – and heals him (Matt. 8:5-13).

Jesus' definition of politics and his actions are very revolutionary in his world. His words and His actions vehemently criticized the existing order of the political systems of Jews and the Roman Empire. He was not merely attacking the politics of his day as everyone else did. He was not preparing a military army to establish His Kingdom. His Kingdom and its kingship are non-violent. However, Jesus was not merely non-violently resisting and revolting the political powers of his day but was standing against the political ideology that is behind almost all of the political systems in history, then and now. Jesus' revolutionary battle was not merely against the enemies before him but against the dark spiritual powers which are being expressed in the physical world. I'm not trying to say Jesus is merely battling against Satan and spirits in the unseen world but standing against those powers and principalities of the world which are the expressions of spiritual evil. This is to say, the spiritual powers are defined more in the terms of existing socio-political realities.

Jesus also defined the politics of the Kingdom of God in terms of service rather than being served. In Mark 10:35-45, we see Jesus' definition of his politics. When Jesus began to head towards Jerusalem, there was a thought running in the mind of his followers that Jesus would finally overthrow the political powers in Jerusalem and set up his kingdom there. Previously they were guarding Jesus against those whom they thought as troublemakers and disturbers of the peace and movement of this Messiah. They stopped children from approaching Jesus because they thought Jesus would be the sort of king that they have expected him to be. Later they heard Jesus saying that he is going to be assassinated in Jerusalem which was too ironic for the disciples to understand.

In such a context, with such an ideology of defining Jesus on their terms, there is a request to Jesus from the side of James and John. It was a request from their mother that they must seat beside Jesus in his kingdom. In such a setting, Jesus defines his actual politics. It was not a definition against the political messiah but against the definition of political Messiah by those who are around him. He said that it is the people of this world who strive for positions of power. They exercise mastery and tyranny over those who are under them. They want to be in high places being served by them. They want to be guarded and have their needs met by the people while they rarely think of the real issues in society. They come up as powerful ones dominating and discriminating society. What is the difference if the Kingdom of God is also all about similar power – striving for the higher positions to exercise mastery, tyranny and power over the people?

Jesus goes on to define true power as service. While the powerful ones in the world get served and never really care for the people's needs, the followers of Jesus must exercise a different form of politics – the politics of service. Those who want to rule in the Kingdom of God must become the least among everyone – denying his/her selfish greed and willing to consider others also as better human beings. It is all about selfless service. Caring for the people, understanding their situations and setting things right. Such politics make the world a better place. Jesus concludes his definition of politics of service by defining his role as a king: "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." Often, this statement is plucked out of its context and taken as the proof text to defend the doctrine of atonement defined by the church. Although it speaks about Jesus' redemptive death, it is not limited to the

narrow scope of the theories of atonement. If at all the statement is about an atonement that defines the politics of God's Kingdom.

Jesus demythologizes the definition of power and politics in the world. Jesus' politics is demonstrated when he pays attention to the ones who are forcibly silenced by the majority. Healing of the blind Bartimaeus was such an example. He embraced the people who are otherwise ignored, despised and neglected by the rest of the society. The politics of compassion and service is against not only the national narrative of the Jewish nation and the Roman imperialism, it is a criticism of the powers and politics of this world from the very beginning which is expressed in exercising mastery and tyranny over the subjects, making them victims of socio-political evil structures but seldom trying to bring an order that makes the world a better place for everyone.

Finally, we have Jesus in the Gospel of John standing before Pilate and being questioned about his kingship. He defines his kingship as not like any of the kingdoms and powers of this world. The followers of this king are not called to wage a war against the opposing lords and authorities. Even in the Garden where Jesus was arrested, he was not taking on the side of Peter who dragged his sword to harm the soldiers. Instead, he was standing for his political definition and healed the hurt soldier even when he knew he would be arrested and be killed.

Jesus not only criticized the national narrative of the Jewish majority in expecting a military Messiah to be on their side driving out the Romans and establishing the Kingdom of God on their terms. He also prophetically warned the nation to repent of its ways – to renounce its definition of the kingdom. We have seen previously that there were violent political revolutionaries who were trying to wage a war against the Romans. They violently protested against Roman imperialism but most of the time ended up being executed as criminals. If such was the way of the Jewish nation, they would be handed over to their enemies who would destroy their city leaving no homeland for the Jews. Jesus called them to accept his definition of politics which would save them from imperial Rome. Jesus employs the apocalyptic language in foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem in Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21 if they fail to turn around from their ways.

Once Jesus was teaching the people around him about settling with their opponents, to set their case with their opponents before they are

handed over to the judgement (Luke 12:57-59). At that very moment, some have informed Jesus that Pilate mixed the blood of some Galileans with his sacrifices (Luke 13:1). Jesus critically responded to them saying that if they consider these Galileans as sinners and thus they have been killed, the more is yet to befall on the whole land if they fail to repent – a turnaround from their definition of politics and revolution. The condition would become worse than those who have died because the tower of Siloam fell upon them. Those who are residing in Jerusalem are no less than them. If they continue to exercise and define politics on their terms, they are going to receive the worst of all the above incidents (Luke 13:2-5). After this, Jesus speaks a parable of the fig tree that is given a chance to bear the fruit. If it does not bear the fruit in the due time, it will be uprooted. This is what John the Baptist also said. If the people are adamant to renounce their style of opposing their enemies and not accepting the Kingdom of God that is going to come in a different way than they have expected, they are on the verge of being cut off. They are at the point of being destroyed unless they repent.

The same happened in AD 70. While those Jews who have rejected Jesus to be their Messiah engaged in revolting against Rome in AD 66-68, it all ended up in the destruction of the city and the Temple by the Roman Empire in AD 70. It was a time when many military figures appeared on the scene claiming to be their messiahs. Many sheltered in the temple of Jerusalem believing that it would not be destroyed because it is the dwelling place of their God. But their dreams failed. There was brutal warfare and bloodshed in the city, many were murdered and the city was deserted by the Roman armies. The temple was brought to grounds leaving no stone upon stone. Even after the destruction of Jerusalem, there was another Messiah who appeared on the scene, Simon bar Kochba (meaning Simon the son of a star). He was another stereotype of his preceding ones and tried to revolt against Rome between AD 132 and 136. He was also finally executed by Rome. Thus the Jewish national narrative was proven void. While on the other side, there are these Jews who accepted Jesus as their Messiah and are spreading throughout the Roman Empire even bringing the Gentiles into their family. This Kingdom of God in Jesus reaches the ends of the world.

To summarize Jesus' politics and his definition of the Reign of God, it is a politics of God who is compassionate and demanding the same from His people. It is a politics of non-violence, justice, peace, forgiveness,

love and selfless service. It is a revolution against the ideology of politics of the world. It is a Kingdom where the meek shall inherit the earth. It is a kingdom of peacemakers. It is politics that comforts the mourners. The captives are set free and the people everyone in the society feels worthy enough to receive compassion in the context of inhumanity and indifference of the political (dis)order of the world. When God chooses to rule the world, He chooses the weak and humble to demonstrate His powerful majesty to the world.

*For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.  
He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.  
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight. (Ps. 72:12-14)*

It is the eschatological kingdom of God breaking into history right now and here in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. It is the inauguration of a whole new era bringing a climax to swords and spears and the spiritual power that enslaves the people. This happened in our time, space and matter. It is as if God's space suddenly broke into human space. It is nothing less than heaven treading on the ground of earth.

### 5.3.3 ECONOMICS OF EQUITY AND SHARING

The Jesus we encounter in the Gospel narratives is someone who always criticizes the rich classes in the society yet his criticism of the rich classes is never equivalent to the Marxist definition of economics. It is said that Jesus is impartial in his attitude towards people yet he was often found criticizing the rich and powerful and taking the side of the poor and oppressed. He happens to be around the downgraded classes of society and brings *good news to the poor*. Does it mean that Jesus was in favour of the poor and calling everyone to revolt against the powerful rich classes and liberate themselves? That's the Marxist version of creating a classless society that can be proven wrong in its outcomes.

Jesus, in fact, was not trying to prepare a band of his followers who would overthrow the rich. Jesus' criticism against the rich was much like the criticism of the prophets before him. The prophets stood against those who defined success in terms of becoming rich, powerful and self-satisfied. Such success is not the definition of God's character. He is just



and righteous. While justice means setting the things right, ordered and perfect, righteousness is keeping right, order and perfection. The word justice is not merely about retaliation but restoration. The poor in society are said to be experiencing injustice because they are more vulnerable and they are unconsidered in society.

In such times, the prophets criticized the economic structures of the society calling everyone to render justice. They even went to the extreme of saying that their worship of God is useless and sinful if they fail to do justice. The justice for them is not about the poor and weak revolting against the rich landlords but the powerful and rich using their material resources to restore the poor. It is a correction of what had happened. But most of the time, the rich ones found to be exceeding in their wealth, becoming more selfish and greedy, not even considering their poor neighbours. The poor in society happened to live at the mercy of capitalists. Jubilee year was never practised. The rapid growth in the economic system simply increased labour, slavery and exploitation. The agricultural lands were subjugated by the rich landlords and the poor farmers were oppressed.

In the time of Jesus, the economic condition in the Jewish homeland became much worsened because of the rise of Roman imperialism. Jews were burdened with heavy taxes and their life became miserable day by day. While the rich aristocrats had no problem with the taxation because of their socio-political positions, it was the poor peasants who suffered much. The influx of a great population into the city of Rome and other cosmopolitan cities brought the scarcity of resources. To meet the needs of these citizens, the Roman Empire levied heavy taxes upon their vassal kingdoms and thus making the conditions of the people worse.

In such a context, some many riots and protests happened in the land of Jews against Roman imperialism. The Empire did its best (worst) to silence these upheavals. Worse than this is the association of Jerusalem temple with the corrupted economics. The trade and business in the temple just made it the worst place for any poor to worship God in freedom. Meanwhile, the rich in society are greedy, self-satisfied and never trying to vindicate the poor.

Jesus criticized the rich because he saw them as responsible for poverty in society. It is because they do not want to come out of their luxurious comfort zones to restore the lives of those who are

underprivileged and downtrodden. It was a time when the religious leaders were encouraging the people to give to the Lord what is supposed to belong to their parents. Jesus criticized them saying this is not what their God was expecting. He is not greedy and selfish like them. God of Israel is seriously concerned about the wellbeing of society. He needs people to render justice and be compassionate. When this is not happening, Jesus prophetically criticized them.

Jesus announced blessing over the poor, hungry and needy while he pronounced woes on the rich and satisfied (Luke 6:20-26). One of the lines in Mary's song recounts such a character of God: "He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). Jesus' critique of the rich must not be seen from the narrow scope of Marxist ideology but the perspective of distributive justice and restorative justice. Distributive justice refers to the equal distribution of resources according to the need of the people. It is not about giving everyone the same amount of resources but dividing them appropriately so that finally everyone will be in equal status. Restorative justice is about taking from the rich and giving it to the poor so that the poor may be restored as equal to the other. This is to say that the rich must work for creating a society where the distribution of the economy is just and righteous.

Jesus speaks of the parable of the rich fool who is self-satisfied and yet cannot save his own life (Luke 12:13-21). Once Jesus was encountered with a rich young man who was very enthusiastic to partake in the life of God's Kingdom and asked Jesus about what he is supposed to do to gain eternal life. When Jesus asks him to follow the commandments in the Law of Moses, he claims to be practising all of them. Finally, Jesus asks him to sell out everything that is with him, distribute it to the poor and start to follow him. Suddenly, the young man feels disappointed at the words of Jesus and goes away. In this situation, Jesus says to his followers that it is harder for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God than for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:17-31). In another parable, Jesus speaks of a rich man who is never concerned about the poor Lazarus lying before his house yet indifferent enough to care for this man. Finally, the rich man dies and goes to a place of torment. When he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to earth so that his brothers can see him and be changed. The response is that they have Moses and prophets with them yet they fail to listen to them. Moses and prophets here is a reference to the first two sections of the Hebrew Bible (*Torah* and *Neviim*).

In such a setting where the rich are never concerned about the plight of the poor when success is defined in terms of getting rich and becoming more comfortable and luxurious, Jesus demythologizes the definition of economics by the society. He makes radical claims that the people cannot serve both God and mammon because they are in danger of loving the one and hating the other. Until the rich never come down from their positions to restore the community, they cannot claim to be the citizens of God's Kingdom.

When Jesus was teaching the disciples how to pray, he asked them to pray for the daily bread. The prayer that Jesus taught (what we often call the Lord's Prayer), is not merely about the systematic structure of our prayer. It was a revolutionary prayer that demythologized the existing realities. It is a prayer for God's Kingdom to come. It is a prayer for God's will to happen on earth as it is in heaven. The prayer has revolutionary ideas in it. It was not at all about the specified format of prayer. It is the prayer of Jesus, the prayer of the church and must become the prayer of ours too. (I'm not calling to repeat the same words but to understand it and pray in such a revolutionary way.)

The economy of God's Kingdom is not about having great material wealth. It is not at all the concern of the people to gain riches. Instead, the economy of God's Kingdom is having daily bread. It is a prayer for equity. It deconstructs the idea of the *prosperity gospel*. In a world that is striving for gaining wealth and trying to be greedy and selfish, having as enough as possible to live luxuriously for years, Jesus's followers pray for the bread of the day. They are not too selfish to become rich and well settled rather they make their riches a blessing for many others. Jesus taught a prayer of Jubilee year where the debts are forgiven and the people are set free from the burden of slavery. The summary is that they do not serve mammon but serve God and use their wealth to restore many others.

Jesus formed a new society that includes people from all classes of society. There are both rich and poor. He shares his banquet with everyone and brings everyone to one table where both rich, as well as poor, celebrate eating together. While humans make feasts and invite only those who are equal to them and feel irritated when someone lowly appears in the scene, Jesus breaks with such a system. There are tax-collectors, fishermen and rich who share their table without discrimination. The unjust ones are transformed by Jesus to render justice (Luke 19:1-10). It is a kingdom with the economics of equity and justice.

**5.3.4 RELIGION AND SOCIETY OF THE REGENERATED**

We already have been discussing how religion was corrupted in the times of Jesus. Beginning with the temple, it has become a place where injustice, corruption, and robbery is found. While it was a centre of the religion of Jews, it was also a centre for everything that is debased to the God of Israel. The sacred space where heaven and earth supposed to meet has become the place of *wild hyenas* that are too selfish and greedy. It seems that this is no longer the house of the God of Israel. It seems that the glory that was present in the temple in the past is no longer available there but doing its work in and through the person of Jesus the Messiah. The temple, therefore, is not the resting place for the God of Israel.

Apart from the corruption in the temple, a lot was going outside. The strict religious leaders who were very rigorous of Jewish nationalism had drafted a huge set of patterns of life that is supposed to be followed by each individual to be eligible enough to enter into the Kingdom of God when it inaugurates in their time and space. Although this constitution was based on the same scriptures that Jesus read, it was a legalistic definition of God's commandments in the past. They have tried to intensify the practice of these commandments to be prepared for God's Kingdom to come. They made humans mere robots that are programmed with the codes of legalism.

The legalism of Jesus' day was so dangerous and risky because it almost left no room for humanitarian concern. Everything in religion and society has been defined in terms of mandatory principles that are supposed to be followed by everyone. Let me just give you the example of the Sabbath. As we know the Sabbath is a day of rest from all the work. It is a day to have fellowship with the family and enjoy the life that is given by God. It is a day where rest is celebrated as the worship of God. It is a way of showing that the people are not anxious about their works and they simply consider the work as the gift of God, not as something that subdues their health and happiness. But what happened with the religious leaders in Jesus' day was that they defined Sabbath in a more legalistic way and listed out different prohibitions. It almost created a society where even helping a person on the day of the Sabbath is a punishable offence. While God intended Sabbath to be a day of peace, rest and comfort to the people, the legalistic leaders made it too burdened to be practised that even when Jesus healed the people on Sabbath, they looked down on it as a serious crime.

In such a setting, Jesus broke with the traditions and legalism set forth by the religious leaders of his day. He broke with the order set forth by the popular religion because the results of these orders overruled humanness. He criticized these leaders for being hypocrites. They seriously consider the traditions laid down by their forefathers but never take consideration of the things that are supposed to be taken seriously. They almost traded justice, righteousness and compassion for the sake of keeping the traditions. They just became whitewashed tombs that are shamefully corrupted within but appear to be religious externally. Therefore, Jesus criticized their exterior things because of their interior aspects. It was not the intention of Jesus to stand against the practices of the people but he was seriously concerned about the people because, in their illusion of being religious, they are creating a society that is not at all corresponding to the vision of Yahweh that is expressed in the Hebrew Bible.

Jesus also attacked the religious exhibition in the public. For him, it is not how much one appears to be religious in the public squares is important but about how one is closely connected to the Father even in the closed rooms. He criticizes those who give alms in public to gain a reputation in society. People are not supposed to help others because it is their platform to show their concern towards the poor but they must help others because they feel the pain of others and have a humanitarian heart.

The religion and society in Jesus' day had become too indifferent to the real crises of the people. While the legalistic definitions introduced what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable and what is good and evil, it formed a society where the unaccepted are treated like sub-humans. People were never ready to accept the ones whom the religious legalism had marked to be unacceptable. They want these outcasts to never enter the Kingdom of God. Even if they are ready to change their lives, society was never ready to forgive and accept them back to the fellowship. Once defined as unacceptable, it is unacceptable forever. This is to say that the constitution defined by Pharisees and other religious leaders was too rigid to make a room for forgiveness and acceptance.

Jesus criticized the religion through different parables. The parable of lost sheep is about a shepherd seeking the one lost sheep leaving the ninety-nine. When he gets it back, there is great joy and celebration.

Jesus explains the parable in terms of the joy in the presence of God in heaven when a sinner repents. In the parable of the lost son, the elder one seems to be unhappy with the return of his brother and does not share in the joy and celebration of the family. The unlost ones in these parables are defined as self-righteous who do not need forgiveness. Often, we Christians tend to apply these parables to ourselves for every minute mistake we commit. But the context of the parable is about the acceptance of the unacceptable ones when they change their lifestyle. Often we do not stand in the position of the lost son but in the position of the elder son who is unhappy when God loves our rivals who did the worst to the family. We are unhappy when an unacceptable person finds a room in the fellowship of God.

In the parable of Good Samaritan, Jesus vehemently attacks the religious legalism of his day. They are too blind to concern for those who require immediate help. They are too legalistic to have compassion. When Jesus says that a Samaritan comes to help this Jew who was beaten and lying naked struggling to breathe, it was an attack against the questioner himself who asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour?" The lawyer who asked Jesus this question might be expecting the next person in the story would be a Pharisee who comes to help this victim, Jesus says that it was a Samaritan. In Jesus' times, the Samaritans were considered *untouchables* and *despised race* but in his story, Jesus vindicates this Samaritan to criticize the religious legalism and superstitions. For our application, we are not supposed to identify with the victim in the story and consider Jesus as that Samaritan. It is not that. Often we become like the priest and the Levite who were too religious to look at the suffering ones and have compassion on them.

Jesus was truly concerned about the purity of the heart. He understood people not merely by their actions but by their intentions. This is the reason why he called the religious leaders vessels that are washed outside but not inside. Therefore Jesus calls for the regeneration of the heart. When Jesus speaks about inner purity, it recalls the visions of the prophets in the past who declared that God would give a new heart to His people. Jesus said that the blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God. Jesus called people to have their hypocrisy unskinned and become new persons to be the citizens of the Kingdom of God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of being born again.

Jesus taught that it is not merely the external actions that determine the sinfulness and ungodliness of a person. It is the heart that is the seat of all sorts of good and evil. In the biblical language, the heart is seen as conscience – not merely as an internal organ nor as a symbol. It is the determinant of one's feelings and actions. It is the definition of what a person is. Therefore the heart is not only a part of the body but also the definition of the whole being of a person. Then, this is the place where the person's words and actions are determined. It is from here the things come out. Envy, anger, greed, immoral sexual passions, and all the sorts of evil intentions will result in external actions such as murder, covetousness, adultery, injustice, unrighteousness, etc. Therefore Jesus urged people to change their hearts and love the Lord with all of their intentions, desires, passions, ambitions and decisions. He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8).

When Jesus was calling people for purity in the heart – a change in their intentions and decisions – it was not merely that Jesus was calling people for personal pietism. It is not merely about personal righteousness and individualistic salvation. We, modern Christians, try to make a distinction between personal holiness and social justice. We see both of them as different dimensions of Christianity. There is something dangerous about this. Many give much priority to social works – loving and caring for others – but forget about the personal relationship with God. While others stress the personal relationship with God and personal righteousness and give less importance to social action. In the biblical worldview, both of these are not two different things but one.

We know and speak a lot about Jesus' personal relationship with God. He often spent nights in prayer and the days in ministry. Sometimes he drew himself away from society and found a time to spend his time in prayer. Well, what was the result of that? It is often said that when Jesus spent much time in prayer, he did powerful ministry on the day times. He could heal the people, do great miracles and perform the things that no one can do. Often it is taught that Jesus is the best model for the prayerful life and we should imitate him and have personal communion with God. Yes, that is right but we often stress the personal prayer of Jesus too much that we fail to understand the aftermath.

The personal relationship of Jesus with God is what is expressed in his words and actions. Humanly speaking, when he was so close with God

in praying and spending time with Him, everything that is demonstrated in the life of Jesus is all about delivering the people, having compassion on them, setting the things right and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. This is to say that all the revolution that Jesus brought was a result of his communion with God.

There is a popular culture in Christianity that divides the gospel into different parts, or these parts are seen as different approaches to the gospel. There is a gospel that is all about personal salvation and personal transformation. There is another gospel which is all about social service (medicine, charity, liberation, etc.), ecological concern and social liberation. Both of these groups go to the extreme of ridiculing the other or to the extreme of focusing only on one and never bothering about the other. For some Christians, salvation is all about a personal relationship with God and social work is supplementary.

We cannot and must never differentiate between the personal pietism and the social action of the followers of Jesus. When we pray, we do not merely pray for our needs to be met or not merely for having a right relationship with God and others but we must pray for the heart of God towards the people. Our relationship with God must demonstrate how we become compassionate to people, how we set things right and how we will be ready to live a revolutionary life, following in the steps of Jesus. Jesus did not use his intimacy with God to avoid the social realities, as contemporary religious trends focus on such attitude, but he used his relationship with God to shock the social realities with a vision for an *alternative existence*.

Jesus' approach to religion and society and his definition of worship and service stands as a challenge both in his world and in ours. We have a lot of conservative fundamentalists who care much more about their personal pietism than the real crises of society. There are also those liberals who simply do some sort of social works but are never seriously religious. Our relationship with God must affect our response to the social evils in the world.

Jesus also criticized the kind of society where the people are unreliable, disloyal and highly concerned about seeking pleasures. He made revolutionary teachings calling people to be reliable without taking oaths, loyal to their partners without even having intentions of sexual desire for others and do to others what they want others to do



to them. Jesus taught in individualistic terms but envisioned a society where everyone is reliable, trustworthy, loyal and regenerated. Jesus taught and looked for a society where the legalistic definitions do not become a foundation to reject and despise the people. It is the definition of God's character that defines society. If God is seen from the perspective of a moral judge who is too rigid to consider the people, then the society would be built on the foundations of legalism, indifference and quietness to the crises. If God is seen as compassionate and loving, society would be built on the foundations of compassion, grace and generosity.

Jesus summarizes the whole of the religion and society within two commandments which are the different sides of the same coin: Love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Mark 12:28-31). For Jesus, obedience to God is not merely expressed in terms of keeping the rules and regulations but in terms of loving God and doing the will of the Father. Being religious is not all about keeping ordinances and statutes but understanding the vision of God for the self and the society. Jesus called the people to excel in their righteousness. The definition of righteousness in society would be the Pharisaic way of life. Jesus demythologizes the self-righteousness of Pharisees and Scribes and calls people that their righteousness must excel that of these religious leaders (Matt. 5:20). The religion and society in the Kingdom of God are not merely defined by keeping the ceremonial laws but by creating a society that is after the vision and will of the Father.

Jesus stands as a critique of the official religion of his day. He uncovers it to be mere hypocrisy that simply burdens the people. This is just like another Jeremiah standing right before the religious leaders and making claims that all of their religion is simply an illusion (see Jer. 7). When he saw the people they looked as if overburdened, weary and too weak to stand upright and walk. He calls them to him and offers rest. He calls them to exchange their burden with his yoke. This is an open criticism, open revolution and an open uncovering of the official religion. What they all could do is simply conspire against him in secret but not courageous enough to stop him in public. In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus being questioned by the religious leaders whether or not they can stone a prostitute who has been brought to him. The response of Jesus reveals how stagnant, indifferent, legalistic and hypocrite they are.

Jesus not only spoke as a prophet but also more than a prophet. While the prophets asserted their statements saying, "Thus says the Lord", Jesus asserted his statements saying, "Very truly, I tell you..." It is as if Jesus is more than a mouth-piece of God who communicates the message of God to the people. Jesus makes his statements as if he has all the right to define things as he wants. He appears to be speaking as if he were the God of Israel who instructs and claims to be truthful and authoritative in all of his words. Thus, when Jesus was speaking to the people and correcting them, he speaks as God Himself and also it is like God Himself has come to communicate His message to the people rather than by the means of prophets.

Jesus never wanted religion to be institutionalized. Even if there is a need for institutionalization, it must not be too rigid to be changed according to the need of the time. The foundations of religion and society must be based on humanitarian principles, justice and righteousness, not on legalistic definitions that rule out compassion, mercy and forgiving love. When society becomes so stagnant to accept the people who are ready to change their lives, then the society happens to be at the point of being unaccepted by God because of their rigidity and indifference. In Matthew 8:11-12, Jesus makes a revolutionary claim that might have almost enraged the people to the extreme. According to him, many would come from the east and west and be accepted into the Kingdom of God while those who are supposed to be part of the Kingdom will be thrown out to the darkness. Jesus knew very well what he was saying. He knew very well that such a critique of religion and society could lead him up to be executed as a rebellious leader. But this is not new for him because this was the same response of the people in the past when the prophets criticized their religion and society.

#### **5.4 ASSASSINATION OF THE KING**

All of the teachings and actions of Jesus made him a centre of public attention. The revolution that Jesus not only drew people around him but also developed a conspiracy to arrest and execute him. The words and works of Jesus seemed so disturbing to the leading and upper class of the society because they were condemned and criticized by them. Their *Grand National narrative* of the Jewish nation has been proven to be wrong by him. They were all exposed to be unfit for God's Kingdom

because of their actions. They wanted to kill him because the politics, economic standards, religion and social definition of *this* Messiah did not match with *their* expected military-warrior-pro-majoritarian and anti-Roman Messiah. Thus all this conspiracy led Jesus to the crucifixion – the most shameful, painful and horrible form of death in the Roman Empire. Jesus already knew this would happen.

However, the death of Jesus must not only be seen as the death of a King but also as the death of the Servant of Yahweh, the perfect Israel and the representative of humankind (esp. as in Isaiah 53). Most of the time Christians want to see the death of Jesus like the death of a King (revolutionary) but not as the death of the Servant. Or as the death of a Servant but not as the King. This is why there is a division between the *gospel of the Kingdom of God* and the *gospel of the cross of Christ*. We begin with a different story to speak of the cross of Christ but rarely speak of his execution as a revolutionary. The death of Jesus was also a martyrdom, a Passover sacrifice, atonement and also the *death of God*.

Let me question you directly, “Why Jesus had to (or happened to) die?” The answer of classical conservative Christianity is as simple as, “You know, God created Adam and Eve and put them in the Garden of Eden. He told them not to eat fruit but they disobeyed and ate the forbidden fruit. Thus they became sinners and all the humans became sinners thereafter. Thus all humankind stand as guilty before God. There had been many sacrifices in ancient times and that did not cleanse the sin of people and the wrath of God was burning against all humanity. Then Jesus, the second person of Godhead, came down to earth as a human being. He was sinless as he was born through a virgin and he took the place of us and died on the cross to atone/to cover up our sins. He became our substitution and when this Son of God died, the wrath of God was satisfied and we became righteous before God. Thus, Jesus died for *you* and *me*. He died for us as a sacrifice for our sins. This is what Jesus’ death is all about.” The answer of a liberal Christian or a historian would be as, “Jesus was a great moral teacher and a revolutionary. He did all things to make people good but the people did not like him. He was handed over to the enemies and they brutally killed him. It was a very pitiful and painful death.”

The death of Jesus is the most valued, most contemplated, most precious and most talked topic by the Christians and at the same time it

has been limited a lot, it has been misunderstood a lot and undermined a lot. What we are going to do now is to see the death of Jesus from different angles and how all of them fit into the story of the Bible and how the death of Jesus fits the Kingdom of God. What is the point of Jesus' death? Why did he have to die? What is the result of his death?

#### 5.4.1 A REVOLUTIONARY DEATH

Jesus was revolutionary *par excellence*. He did not wage a war against the religious leaders of Judaism nor the representatives of the Roman Empire. He was not a revolutionary like any other figures who revolted against Roman imperialism. He was neither an escapist who tried to live a holy life outside the society and calling people to come out of the society to start a new life nor was he a traditional and typical warrior who tried to violently revolt against the government to bring liberation for the people. He lived, spoke and acted within the society without causing any violence or war yet he was a revolutionary.

Jesus criticized the existing socio-political, economic and religious setting of his time. His way of interacting with these realities was different from all others who lived in his time. He radically opposed the way the world was moving in his day – moving toward its destruction. Jesus' opposition to the national narrative of the Jewish nation and his opposition against the Roman imperial ideology simply put him in a very dangerous position. Nobody in his day would have thought Jesus to be a mere religious leader who simply came to start a new religion. Nobody would have seen Jesus as a mere moral teacher who gave a new and higher form of ethical principles for humankind. Everything he taught and everything he did made the people around him to feel suspicious that either he was a prophet or a new political leader starting a new kingdom movement.

The whole ministry of Jesus was moving in the direction of his execution on the cross. His forerunner, John, was brutally murdered by Herod Antipas for condemning him for having an illicit relationship with his brother's wife. From that time on Jesus came to know that he would also be treated similarly. Jesus knew very well that his going to Jerusalem would put him in danger that he would become the victim of the same evil which he was opposing. He knew that he would have to die as a martyr.

The right place to begin with to understand Jesus' death as martyrdom is in the Old Testament itself. In the narrative of the Old Testament, we could see the prophets being suffered, tortured and even killed because they opposed the majoritarian society. Whenever they exposed the seriousness of the problem with the attitude and actions of the majority of the society, when they exposed the political, social, religious and moral failure of the people, they received harsh treatment from the society. The prophets whom we see in the pages of the Bible were not so welcomed by the majoritarian society. The official religion and the official society legally suppressed them because these prophets exposed the *illegality* and *failure* of the same. While they never wanted to accept their failure, they reacted with cruelty and hardness of the heart. Whenever the prophets protested against the social and religious evil, on behalf of the victims who suffered violence and injustice because of the greed and selfish passions of the majority, their voices were silenced through violent means.

This happens not only with the prophets in Israel but with anyone in the world who stands as a critique of the popular culture and official religion and state. Just consider the protests happening in the world. When they expose the failure of the authorities and call them for action, they are not welcomed by the majoritarian society. People do not want to listen to the criticism and they try their best (worst) to suppress the voices that raise against them. A critique simply puts himself/herself in trouble of being threatened. History gives us many examples like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi who became victims of what they have opposed.

Similarly, the evil of the world was building around Jesus right from his birth. He escaped the brutal sword of Herod the Great. Right from the beginning of his ministry plans and conspiracies were being set up to suppress Jesus and to have him publicly executed. The revolution of Jesus began to set things right. It began to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. His words and actions of love, compassion and authority began to set the people free from the impairments that bound them for years. People around him celebrated and made parties with the dawn of this new age of justice and peace.

Jesus acted as a prophet for he did not negotiate with the popular and official culture of his day. He was neither supporting nor standing

neutral. Jesus radically criticized the national narrative of Israel exposing how they are unworthy to fit the vision of their God. He called them to turn around. He did not accept the realities as they are. He disagreed with his environment, he broke with the legalism and popular traditions, he stepped out of the boundaries and he appeared to be launching a new kingdom that is neither like Roman imperialism nor like the kingdom that the majority of the religious leaders expected in Jesus' day. He acted as if he had all the rights and authority to reform the society and begin a new socio-political order.

During the final days of his ministry, the tension was building around him and he sensed that his death is approaching faster than anyone would have expected. The official religion and the official government will join together in sentencing him to death. Finally, he was arrested, charged with many allegations, whipped, abused, mocked as a failed king, and finally was hanged to the cross. He was put to public shame and dishonour. He became the subject of ridicule. Meanwhile, all of his followers have scattered leaving their leader all alone until he has died. He died as a rebel, as a revolutionary, and as a leader of a failed kingdom movement. He became the victim of the same violence and injustice that he had opposed.

However, the crucifixion of Jesus in itself is a revolution. He died like a political rebel but not in the way as others died. He died as a martyr but not as any other Jewish martyrs before him. He suffered and died like a prophet but not like any other prophets in the Old Testament. This is to say, his death was a final inauguration of a revolution – the revolution of non-violence, the revolution of turning the other cheek, the revolution of forgiving love, the revolution of a new Kingdom.

Often we see the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness limited in their scope and not so relevant in his ministry. The temptations that Jesus faced at the beginning of his ministry were the expression of the temptations that he would face throughout the time of his ministry and all of them intensified in the final days of Jesus. Once a while Jesus was foretelling that he would be handed over to the enemies and they would execute him. While Jesus was expecting such a consequence for his words and works, Peter says, "God forbid such a thing happening to you, Lord." To his wonder, Jesus harshly responds, "Get behind me, Satan! You are just a stumbling block for me because you always try to see things from your

human perspective but never from the perspective of God.” (Matt. 16:22-23). It was an offer for Jesus to reorient his kingdom movement according to the traditional fashion – conquest, warfare, defence and militant leadership. Jesus stands against the typical blueprint of the kingdoms and empires of the world. He wants his kingdom to be *unpolluted by the ideology of this world*.

Jesus loves his disciples to the end. He humbles himself and expresses his serving love by washing the feet of his disciples. He knew the one who would betray him to the officials yet he washed the feet of this disloyal friend too (John 13). When he was in the Garden, it was a final test for him whether to hang on to his vision of the kingdom or trade it for his own safety. He is going to be handed to his enemies and this is the time when his spirit troubled and trembled within him. It was a time to decide to continue to carry out the will of his Father. He chooses to face the consequences of accepting the will of his Father and representing His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Once again there was a temptation for Jesus to build personal security by using his inmates. Peter uses his sword to provide security for Jesus but Jesus condemns him and commands him to put his sword back because the sword is for the sword. Those who use a sword will die by a sword. It’s a call for a revolution. Jesus did not call the angels to defeat his enemies nor did he support the militant reaction of his followers. He claimed to be the King but his kingdom was not like any other kingdom in this world. He claimed to have been born to testify the truth. It is the truth that bewildered the political authorities because it was not a typical truth. It was not a typical ideology to build a kingdom. Jesus also claimed to be the Son of God – the Messianic King. Yet he turned his other cheek.

Jesus was given a crown of thorns, a purple robe and a reed as his royal rod. The Roman soldiers might have done this to ridicule him but this is what his kingship is all about. A selfless, non-violent and forgiving kingship. A rule of compassion, love and service. At the same time, another criminal appears on the scene. An unnamed man with the same designation as that of Jesus. It’s Barabbas. The name Barabbas is an Aramaic word that simply means ‘Father’s Son’ or, perhaps, ‘God’s son.’ There is something that goes unnoticed whenever we speak of Barabbas. Barabbas was likely a Zealot because he was arrested for the rebellion against the government and murder (Luke 23:19). It is noteworthy that

some manuscripts of Matthew's Gospel call him as Jesus Barabbas and Jesus of Nazareth as 'Jesus who is called the Messiah' (Matt. 27:17, NRSV and others). Here is another Jesus – Jesus the Father's Son who stands in contrast with Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the Son of God, the Messiah.

Jesus Barabbas stands here in the courtyard of Pilate as the representative of the whole of popular Jewish national narrative. He is the typical example of the revolutionaries who raised rebellions against the Roman government and were punished by the officials. Here is the choice for the majority of the Jews whether they choose Jesus Barabbas as the future of their nation or would they prefer Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. It is evident that they chose Jesus Barabbas as their representative and they do not want to agree with Jesus' definition of politics and the Kingdom of God. It is also noteworthy how Luke mentions Jesus' words to the women who were weeping while he was taking up to the crucifixion:

*A great number of the people followed him, and among them were women who were beating their breasts and wailing for him. But Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For the days are surely coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never nursed.' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us'; and to the hills, 'Cover us.' For if they do this when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:27-30).*

These words of Jesus depict the consequences of the choice of Jewish leaders and the majority of the people. It is not a mere pronouncement of a judgement over Jerusalem but an explicit sorrow for the choice of the people. The way of Barabbas would simply lead them to the destruction of their own city leaving no stone upon stone. If Jerusalem continues to exercise its own way of a violent political revolution against Rome, they cannot escape the destruction that would result as the aftereffect of it.

The crucifixion was a terrible form of execution in Jesus' day. It was the most despised and shameful form of punishment primarily meant to execute rebels, slaves and bandits. The rebels and revolutionaries who raised against Roman imperialism were put to public dishonour. They were hanged naked on the cross. Nobody would desire such execution. People feel very shameful and afraid even with the thought of the cross. It is as painful as hell. The crucified ones are tormented physically and mentally. Often the crucified ones curse their executioners.



When Jesus was crucified, he did not speak like a Jewish martyr or a typical prophet. In later Judaism, many people deliberately became martyrs because they thought that by doing so they can bring God's wrath over their enemies. But Jesus did not pronounce a curse on his enemies. He did not pray for God's wrath upon them just like the Maccabean martyrs. His prayer was revolutionary. It was a prayer for the forgiveness of his murderers. His enemies knew what they were doing. But when Jesus says that they do not know, he might be speaking in terms of the consequence of their actions as they reject him as their Messiah and would choose their ways. This is where Jesus' revolutionary teachings brought to action in his own experiences. He loved the enemies, prayed for those who persecuted him and forgave them without retaliation.

Jesus completely obeyed the will of God even to the point of his death. His obedience is an open criticism of the world's rebellion against God by forsaking the vocation of God that resulted in all sorts of mess and ungodliness in the world. Because the world has chosen to define what is good in its sight and because humans have failed to partner with God in creating a world that brings heaven and earth together, evil and death are introduced in the world. When Jesus showed complete obedience to God, even to the point of his execution on the cross, it radically dismantled the presupposition of the world that it can solve by itself all the problems without partnering with God.

Who all are responsible for Jesus' death? Jews or Romans? This is the primary question that many people ask. I neither take the position of anti-Jewish and pro-Roman view of many conservatist fundamentalist Christians nor I take the pro-Jewish and anti-Roman stance as many liberals and sceptics do. Both were responsible for Jesus' execution. While it was Jews who handed over Jesus to the Roman authorities, it was Roman authorities who executed Jesus as a State-rebel because crucifixion was a Roman form of punishment. Jews joined with Romans in executing Jesus. When I say Jews, I do not refer to the Jewish nation as a whole nor do I take an anti-Jewish position because Jesus himself was a Jewish Messiah, the early followers of Jesus were Jewish and the whole Bible is Jewish. But I simply refer to those Jews who refused to accept Jesus as their Messiah. At the same time, Pilate was no Jewish sympathizer. He is also known for his cruel actions as the governor of Judaea. Pilate cannot be justified in the execution of Jesus.

Moreover, the story of Jesus' crucifixion reveals the depth of evil within humankind. While Jews and Romans are on the scene as responsible for Jesus' death, it is our story too. They are standing as representatives of what the entire humankind had been up to. It is humankind's rejection to mend its own ways and become the image of God the creator. It is *our* rebellion against the Kingdom of God. It is *our* deliberate rejection of the message of love. It reveals a fact that despite God's breakthrough into history and calling us to align with His vision of building a Kingdom, a house and a home where He can live with us, we the people do not want to accept His definitions of politics and society and always want to steep into our own definitions. It is as if majoritarian humanity unanimously and unequivocally shouting at Jesus, "Crucify him! There is no lord for us but Caesar! He is not our King! He is not our Messiah! He is not the one who can bring *our* national narrative to its climax!" The crucifixion of Jesus is the revelation of the heart of the majoritarian society that never wants the people to be liberated, joyous and celebrating and never wanted the Kingdom of God to break into history on *God's* terms.

Albeit, no one was able to stop Jesus from being crucified as the *King of the Jews* – the title that Herod Antipas always dreamt to achieve. A Roman centurion at the cross found it inevitable to confess that Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 15:39). This is a parody of the empire of which he is a representative. He knows who the Son of God is actually. He knows that this title applies to Caesar who rules *his world* from Rome, clothed in majesty, sitting on his royal throne, governing the nations and exercising a great power with no rival to him. He knows this *truth*. Yet he feels inevitable for him to address this crucified man as the Son of God, nay, *truly the Son of God*. This Jesus claimed to be a king yet crucified as a rebel, hanging naked on the cross, with blood oozing out of his wounds, mocked by his people and seems to be powerless to save himself. This Roman centurion applies the elite title to this crucified victim. By making such a claim, he confesses Jesus to be the true Lord of the world and denies the power of Caesar. While the Caesar of the Roman Empire was being hailed as the son of god and all of the emperors are worshipped as the lords and gods, here is this centurion who realizes that all of these emperors were but representatives of a deceptive power - a power that appears to be the definition and foundation of the empire.

The power of the Roman Empire is the falsified truth of all the imperial regimes of the world both then and now. The thirst for more

power, more land and more superiority will never be satisfied. The ultimate reality and the truth of the power do not lie in lynching the powerless minorities but in the enemy-forgiving love, restorative love and self-giving love. This is the true power that the world considers foolishness. But God's powerful foolishness can overthrow the foolish power of the world.

Death of Jesus is a revolution in a world that defines power in terms of subjugation, conquest and warfare. We live in a world where the most powerful weapons are being manufactured by the defence forces of the nations. We live in a world where power, authority and politics work together in creating a world that is lifeless, inhumane, cruel, corrupted and retaliating. The greed for power expresses itself in the form of destructive forces that take the life of many poor and powerless. All the power is illusion, falsehood and deception of self. The poor, oppressed and marginalized are the first victims of the forces that bring destruction. The world needs to realize Jesus as the *Son of God – the true definition of power* - before it is too late to recover.

*Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." Pilate asked him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:36-37)*

#### **5.4.2 LIBERATION AND EXODUS**

It is quite impossible to understand the Bible ignoring the theme of the exodus. Somehow it takes the central place throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and becomes more central in the life and work of Jesus himself. The exodus-event refers to the liberation of Israel from Pharaoh's tyranny and coming out of Egypt. It is not merely an event that narrates the origins and identity of Israel. It is not only about the liberation of some slaves. It speaks more than that. It reveals the character of God. It is not only about the identity of Israel but also about human dignity. It is the story of a God who never makes a covenant with the tyrant lords but overthrows them to liberate those people who happened to live in the shadows of the death being mistreated by the powerful ones.

Exodus is also the initiation of a new society and a new nation that partners with God in all areas of its life. It is not merely the beginning of a new faith but the new people itself. God makes a covenant with them to be their God and to bring life and blessing into the world. It is the time when God creates a society that never follows the patterns of Egypt in its religion, politics and economics. It is unique and dedicated to Yahweh in all the areas of its life. This is a society where justice, righteousness, freedom and peace are given the primary place. Therefore, the theme of the exodus is about liberation, overthrowing the dominant and oppressing powers, and creating a new society with new life and a new vocation. We have seen earlier that the feast of Passover reminds people of this event and renovates their hope that their God would continue to liberate them from the oppressing powers.

The Gospel writers narrated the life of Jesus from the perspective of Exodus and Passover. The birth of Jesus was narrated by Matthew just as the narrative of the birth of Moses in Exodus. Jesus happens to become the victim of a tyrant king yet escapes while all other babies in his hometown are brutally murdered. The outcry and lament in the village resound the lament of the people during the time of exile. Jesus comes out of Egypt and after some years a man appears on the scene, John the Baptist. John and his message are introduced to the readers as the announcement of a new exodus. In Mark's Gospel, we have Jesus speaking of binding the strong man (Mark 3:27). Luke's Jesus opens his ministry announcing that his work is about liberating the oppressed and imprisoned (Luke 4:16-21). In the Gospel of John, Jesus is introduced as the *Lamb who takes away the sins of the world* which simply reminds us of the Passover Lamb symbolizing the liberation (John 1:29) and we also see Jesus speaking about the imminence of the time when the ruler of this world will be thrown out (John 12:31).

The whole narrative of Jesus' life and ministry consummates in his crucifixion. For Jesus, the tyrant enemies are neither Romans, as defined by the Jews, nor the Jewish leaders who were corrupt and unjust. The real oppressor and the real enemy is the dark spiritual power of which his current world is a representative. This is to say, the enemy for Jesus is the dark powers working behind the corrupted leaders of his time. The enemy is introduced at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry – the Accuser/Adversary/Satan. Satan is not merely a cosmic being who simply works against God and His people but also the dark and wicked spirituality that

is exhibited by the people. This is the spiritual power that brings people into rebellion against God.

Satan is not merely a person or power that influences humankind to choose the wrong ways but also the personification of all the evil in the world. Jesus called one of his disciples Satan when he defined the power in terms of violence and conquest. The Accuser comes to Jesus in the wilderness with his definition of power claiming that the whole world is in his hands. It implies that the whole world has defined power in its terms and this definition of power by the world is seen as Satan's definition of power. Therefore Satan and demons are the personifications of the spiritual power that enslaves humans and distorts their purpose and vocation. It is the spirituality working behind the kingdoms, empires and tyrant lords of the world. Hence Jesus as a revolutionary was not merely in conflict with the people before him but conflicted with the spiritual power behind these people that is enslaving, subjugating and distorting the entire humanity. It distorts the image of God stamped in humanity.

While defining what the true power is, Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus saw his death as a part of demonstrating the power of liberating the people. A ransom is a price exchanged for someone's liberation. Jesus exchanged his own life for the redemption of humankind as a whole. While the rulers of this world define their power in terms of bringing death to the people, Jesus defines his power in terms of giving life to the people even at the cost of his very own life.

In John 12:20-36, Jesus speaks of his death in a radically different way. He sees his death in terms of the defeat of the *ruler of this world* and the exaltation of the *Son of Man*. After Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey, there were some Greeks who came to worship during the festival. They wished to see Jesus. Jesus says that the hour of his glorification has come and says that the grain of the wheat must fall into the earth and die before it sprouts out and bears fruit. In v. 32, he spoke of his death as his exaltation and this will mark an end to the power of the ruler of this world. Those who walk in the light will not be overcome by darkness. Here it is evident that Jesus spoke of his death as the glorification that draws all people to him. It is not only the Greeks or Jews but the whole of humanity will be drawn unto him. This is a parody of the world's rule. While the ruler of this world, Satan, expresses his reign through

the powers and authorities of this world and deceives people with his definition of power, the death of Jesus is a means of overthrowing the dark powers and glorification of the Son of Man – the true representative of God and the faithful humanity.

In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), we see Jesus' words before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish legal court) on the night he was arrested and interrogated by the religious leaders. After all their interrogations and failure to charge Jesus as blasphemer and worthy of execution, they come up with one final question, "Tell us, are you the Messiah, the Son of God?"

*Jesus said, "I am;  
and, 'you will see the Son of Man  
seated at the right hand of the Power,' and  
'coming with the clouds of heaven.'"* (Mark 14:62)

Jesus quotes from Daniel 7:13ff which speaks of one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven and stands before God to receive all the authority and power on earth overthrowing the beastly imperial regimes that crush down the people. We have seen earlier that the title 'Son of Man' refers to the representative of the faithful people of God who stay loyal to Him even in the face of beastly powers that try to crush them down. Now, Jesus claims to be that *Son of Man* who would be seated at the right hand of God (meaning, he becomes the Lord of the heaven and earth having all the power and authority) coming with the clouds of heaven. We often think of this statement of Jesus as referring to the distant future and has nothing to do with the present. But Jesus was sure that the ones who are questioning him *will see* the coming of the Son of Man.

Thinking of this in terms of Jesus' death, he speaks of himself as the Son of Man – the representative of God's people under suffering – in terms of himself being crushed by the powers of the world. But he also sees his death as the exaltation of the Son of Man to receive all the authority on earth and establish his reign. The exaltation of the Son of Man would be the time when the beast-like imperial forces will be overthrown while the *humans* regain power. In other words, Jesus himself becomes the victim of the beastly powers to defeat them in his *humanity* by never yielding to the temptation of adopting the patterns of power set by this world. Instead of trying to show his power by leading a military army and overthrowing the empires, he chooses to remain as *a human* so

that the ultimate power of *humanness* can be expressed and having the *bestly* powers of the darkness defeated.

The crucifixion of Jesus, therefore, is a battle with the dark spiritual powers of the world and with the death itself which is brought as a result of humans' choice of wisdom and power on their terms. Jesus himself becomes subject to death. Death is the ultimate weapon of all the dark spiritual power working in and through the people. What harm that anyone can do to their fellow humans more than taking their lives – bringing death? That's all a human or the evil in humans can do. Yet that is a serious pain. Death, for Jesus, is not something that can be rejoiced at. It is not merely a departure of the soul from the body. It is not a moment of celebration. It is the saddest reality and a reality that is against the creation of God. It is against the vision of God for humankind. It pains God as much as it pains us. Now, Jesus stands before this ultimate enemy of God and humanity. Yet that is what all that Satan could do finally. This is all that the powers of this world do to anyone who stands against them.

At the death of Jesus, the powers and principalities of this world proved to be an utter failure. At the cross, all the spiritual evil that deceived people of its definition of power and ruling now stands exposed, disarmed and put to the public shame. This is to say when the world has tried to put Jesus to a public shame by suppressing and rejecting his inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, the same world is put to the public shame that it was utterly incapable of ceasing the revolution of the Kingdom of God. It was dramatically defeated. The ideology of the powerful ones of the world – the ideology of subjugation, conquest, oppression, and dominion over the weak and powerless – simply proven to be powerless and worthless when Jesus expressed his ideology of love and forgiveness.

The death of Jesus was liberation and a new exodus of humankind as a whole that paved the way to the formation of the new humanity which no longer aligns with the satanic definition of power and politics but rules the world like God bearing His royal image. This new humanity aligns with the vision of God for the world and shares in the transforming life of God. These liberated ones rule the people not by the sword but by love and forgiveness. They do not bring death but revive the people and restore their lives. They become the priests and kingdom of God on earth representing the rule of God and His life on earth as it is in heaven. Death

of Jesus is the inauguration of a whole new age which was hoped by many great figures of history. It is a parody of the powers of the world.

*He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it (cross). (Col. 2:15)*

*They sing a new song:*

*“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,  
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you  
ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language  
and people and nation;  
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests  
serving our God, and they will reign on earth. (Rev. 5:9-10)*

#### 5.4.3 HE BORE OUR INIQUITIES

Jesus died for our sins and transgressions. Needless to say about the central place taken by this theme in Christianity today. This theme echoes much louder than any other. Very often this very theme is taken to the extreme of denying all other aspects of Jesus' life and ministry. Often this theme simply shadows the overall life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. This is to say we simply put Jesus into this straitjacket of *atonement for sins*. There are even other examples of extremism that ignorantly paganize the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion. Because of such extremist emphasis on Jesus' atoning death and abruptly misunderstanding the overall meaning of Jesus' life, liberals denied this theme entirely to say that Jesus never died for sins. These conservative fundamentalists emphasize the atonement so much that they deny Jesus' death was a murder or political execution.

We need to understand a couple of themes in the Old Testament which set the background for the theology that Jesus died for the forgiveness of humankind's sins. Firstly, let us try to understand what a sacrifice means. There are different sacrificial offerings practised in the religion of Israel to worship God. However, all the offerings were not meant for worship nor all the offerings are meant for sacrifice for sins.

Sacrifice was a *people's* solution for the central problem of humankind about how the limited human creatures can bridge with the infinite God who is *separate* (holy) from the human world. This distance between God and people becomes more serious because of the sinfulness of these finite and weak creatures. To bridge this, they separated/set apart an animal or bird as *sacred for God*. The word sacrifice means *to make*



*something sacred* which shows that it is a purely religious term. The sacred creature is not only set apart from the rest of the creatures but also killed on the altars to let humans communicate with God and to reconcile with Him. A part of the sacrificed being is eaten by the one who brought the offering which symbolizes the communion with God. The sacrifice of Atonement (Lev. 16) was a means to purify the whole nation of its ritual defilement including diseases and regular bodily discharges. It is a means of launching a new beginning every year.

Fundamentally, the sacrifice for sins is not a means of satisfying the anger of the deity. Such an idea existed in the pagan religions but not in the religion of Israel. For the people of Israel, the anger of God is not satisfied by offering sacrifices for sins but by repenting and changing the lives. In ancient religions, the deities were believed to be angry at the people very often. Humans are simply the victims of these deities with mood swings. These deities express their anger over human beings all of a sudden. Moreover, the clashes between these deities affect the existence and security of the human world. Therefore, magic, divination and human sacrifices were means of satisfying the anger of these gods. Sometimes when natural calamities or epidemics occurred, the people were often confused about the god who is expressing his anger over the people. The Greco-Roman religion was also obsessed with such an ideology. Yet, this view of appeasing an angry God is alien to the Israelite religion.

The New Testament writers described Jesus' death as a sacrifice for our sins. By his death, humankind is reconciled to God and by his death, we have received the salvation and forgiveness of our sins. However, contemporary Christianity has paganized Jesus' sacrifice making Jesus' atonement as a propitiation – as a pacific death to satisfy the wrath of God. One of the famous hymns (In Christ Alone) expresses such an idea in one of its lines stating, 'Till on the cross as Jesus died, *the wrath of God was satisfied*'. Such an idea not only paganizes the meaning of Jesus' death but also scandalizes God's character. The idea is something like, "God was so angry because the world is full of sin. His wrath burnt against all the humanity that He killed His own Son on behalf of all humanity to satisfy His vengeance." This is ridiculous because the death of Jesus as the sacrifice for sins is the demonstration of God's love for the world that He made a provision for humanity to reconcile with Him.

The second and important theme in the Old Testament to understand the death of Jesus as for our sins is the famous *Servant Song* in Isaiah 53. It is a song about the Servant of Yahweh who suffers because of sins, iniquities and transgression of the people. However, his death becomes a means of healing, restoration and forgiveness for the whole nation. We know that the Servant is both a collective identity of the true Israel but also an individual to whom the true Israel must obey. In one sense, Isaiah 53 is a song about the suffering of the righteous people of God in the hands of their enemies. Such an understanding was not alien to later Judaism because many loyal Jews laid down their lives for their allegiance to their God. It describes true Israel as a suffering servant.

However, the song of the suffering servant is applied also to the individual who stands as a representative of the people of God. Yet it was hard for the Israelites to consider this suffering servant as Messiah because they thought that the Messiah would destroy the enemies but will not be destroyed by the enemies themselves. Even then, as we have seen earlier, the ideas of Messiah and Servant somehow combined within the life and ministry of Jesus.

Understanding Isaiah 53, the suffering of the servant is a result of people's actions. The servant is said to be wounded for the nation's transgressions and iniquities. Transgression refers to the breaking of trust and stepping beyond the boundary. Iniquity refers to steeping with one's own choices. Facing the consequence of one's own choices can be said as *bearing the iniquity*. Now, in this poem, it is the servant who bears the iniquities of the people. This is to say, he bears the consequences of the nation's choices and actions. However, this suffering becomes the cause of the healing and restoration of the people and nations. The same suffering results not only in the exaltation of the servant but also in the transformation of many.

Understanding Jesus as the servant is much more than saying that he died *for* our sins. It is to realize that he died *because* of our sins. The word sin in the Bible is not merely religious. It is simply missing the mark. It is a moral failure to love God and love humans. It is a failure to treat humans as bearers of God's image and likeness. This same sin and our evil choices began to incline rapidly that our choices affected Jesus too. The choice of violence, injustice, oppression, legalism, prejudice, wickedness, moral impurity and ungodliness of humankind is the reason

for the rejection of the Messiah. Humankind is steeped too much in its own choices that it affected Jesus who came with the message of love, forgiveness, compassion, justice and peace. He bore our iniquities. He faced the consequences of our selfish desires, greed, and choices. It is our definition of living that nailed Jesus on the cross.

However, the revolution of Jesus' death is that God used the same means to demonstrate His forgiving love for humanity. Jesus' death must bring a curse upon the majority of humankind because we have rejected him and put him to the cross. But the radicality of God's attitude surpasses the humans' beastliness. The cross of Christ becomes the means of forgiveness for the sins of humankind and it turns out to be a blessing for the whole world. This is what the New Testament authors call grace. This grace and generosity of God have become the means of the salvation of humankind. God's radical love brought life out of death.

*Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
By a perversion of justice he was taken away.  
Who could have imagined his future?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living,  
stricken for the transgression of my people.  
They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich,  
although he had done no violence,  
and there was no deceit in his mouth. (Isa. 53:3-9)*

#### 5.4.4 DEATH OF GOD

The New Testament introduces to us that Jesus is the embodiment of the God of Israel. We have already discussed this theme previously. In the person and work of Jesus, the character and works of Yahweh are demonstrated very evidently. I am not speaking merely about Jesus' divinity but also about his very nature. Jesus showed us what God is like. He is the express image of God – the God of Israel who is the creator and Lord of all the things in heaven and on earth. In Jesus, God is *with us*. God came to rescue humankind and reclaim the world to Himself. He came in the person of Jesus the Messiah. In Jesus, God *pitched His tent* – made His home – among the people. Jesus is the *glory* of Yahweh – the visible expression of God's presence among the people. In him, Yahweh returned in glory and his glory is revealed to all the flesh. It is said that Jesus is empowered by the Spirit of the Lord and at the same time Jesus did the things that only the Lord God can do. This is to say, Jesus and God of Israel are indivisibly the same. The presence of Jesus on earth in the presence of Yahweh for he is *Immanuel* – God with us.

Therefore, when Jesus is crucified, it is not inappropriate to say that God Himself is crucified. The glory of Yahweh that returned to the world is hanging on the cross and experiencing the shame and ultimate form of evil in the world. When it is said that Jesus was trailed, mocked, beaten, and finally handed over to the enemies for crucifixion, it is Yahweh who is betrayed, rejected and killed by the majoritarian society. It is not as simple as dividing between the humanity and divinity of Jesus because in and through the humanity of Jesus it is the nature and character of God that has been expressed. Jesus is not only a representative of God but the incarnation and embodiment of God Himself. In other words, *God died on the cross*. I know this is a radical form of a statement but let me make it clear first what I *do not mean* when I speak of the death of God.

When I say that God *died*, I do not base my statement on the so-called *Death of God* philosophical movement which was developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. It was developed and propagated by people like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gabriel Vahanian, Thomas J. J. Altizer, and other theologians and philosophers of the modern age. This school of radical Christianity refers to the death of God as the dawn of secularism and postmodernism. They propagate that the Christian God has ceased to exist either at creation or cross. It is a philosophical understanding

that the God who once existed is no longer relevant for humanity. Either God is dead literally or exists beyond the physical world never trying to interact with humankind. In simple words, it is about the triumph of human intellect and reasoning over the traditional beliefs about God. We can call it the roots of atheism and however, this movement has its roots in other philosophies such as Epicureanism, Deism and Enlightenment. Therefore, when I speak of the death of God on the cross, I do not promote the above-mentioned movements.

Let us come back to Jesus and the cross. In Jesus, God is nailed to the cross by the cruel and wicked humanity that is steeped in its definitions of power and dominion. If Jesus is the revelation of the nature and character of God *par excellence*, then the crucifixion of Jesus is the world's rejection of that revelation. When the majority of the society in Jesus' world rejected his message of love, compassion, justice, righteousness and true religion, it is nothing less than rejecting God Himself. The world never wanted to repent from its ways. It never wanted to align itself to the Kingdom of God as presented by Jesus the Messiah. They loved and expected God to become their King on their own terms never criticizing the evil in them but rejecting all those whom they reject. They are blind enough to see how God is returning to the people and doing the things that liberated and reformed society and inaugurated the new humanity. They prepared a system based on their own legalistic definitions of God, His people and His Kingdom. What they wanted is God to *come into this prepared system and continue with it* and never expected Him to come into this system simply to break it. In other words, they restricted the *freedom of God* to act on His terms, in His ways and define things as He wants to bring a new beginning.

Now, when they saw Jesus criticizing their national narrative, breaking their system and demonstrating the *freedom of God*, they were disappointed with it. Indeed, they were disappointed with their God who is creating new humanity that brings life and light into His world. They were disappointed with God who is ordering, perfecting and restoring the world so that the world could become a better place for both God and humans to live together. They were disappointed with God who exposed their evil and asked them to do what is right. They wanted their God to liberate and restore the world but they wanted it to happen without disturbing their standards of life. They would have been happier if Jesus simply helped the poor and cared for the needy rather than exposing the

moral failure of the society to understand God and to have compassion for the people.

They were expecting a warrior-God to come and overthrow *their enemies* rather than *His enemies*. There is a difference here, while the enemies of the nation may refer to all those rivals who try to defeat and subdue the nation, the enemies of God refers to something more than that. The enemies of God are those who mistreat the people, oppress and exploit fellow humans. The enemies of God are those who pervert justice and righteousness only to cause suffering and death to other people. In this sense, the enemies of God may include even the people from the Jewish nation. Therefore, the world felt it disgusting when the creator God, embodied in Jesus, came to criticize people asking them to be regenerated and transformed. Thus, they crucified him.

As said earlier, the story of people's rejection of Jesus is our story too. Even we would have responded similarly to cover up our wrongdoings because we never want to be exposed. We always want God to be on *our side* and *against them*. The Jews and Romans in Jesus' day stand as the representatives of the whole of humankind. The crucifixion of Jesus shows humankind's deliberate rejection of God. The Murder of Jesus is the murder of God Himself who wanted to rescue and restore humanity and who wanted to create a family with no outsiders and no enemies.

On the cross of Jesus, God was dead. Nay, we murdered Him. We rejected His Kingdom and His message. We rejected His vocation, His vision of creating a new humanity. We wanted Him dead so that we can continue our show. We wanted Him dead so that we can worship our *imaginary* God who always blesses us and never breaks our *system* that defines God, His people and His Kingdom. We wanted Him crucified so that we can appoint gods of our likeness instead of us bearing the image and likeness of God who created us. It is not only God who is dead on the cross, it also the true humanity that is put to nails. The perfect human being who is the express image of God's character has been murdered. It is the ultimate expression of our oppression, suppression and exploitation of *real* humans. It is also the expression of depriving humans of their dignity and status. In other words, the crucifixion of Jesus reflects the crookedness of the majoritarian society of which even God Himself has become the subject.

But it is not what the *death of God* is all about. God used the cross to identify Himself with human beings. The story of Jesus is the story of God walking with humanity even to the point of His death. First of all, we need to understand the seriousness of *death*. As seen earlier, death is the opposite of God's created world. It is the consequence of human choices and actions in defining what is good on their terms. Death grieves God as much as it grieves humans. Now, on the cross, God Himself tastes the horror of death. He deliberately hands Himself to death which is the profound example of God's identification with humans. He identified with us so much that He even experienced death.

The cross of Jesus Christ is God's identification with humanity as a whole that happens to live in the fear and shadow of death. It is God's outstanding demonstration of power. He did not merely answer the people's issues but He became the part of these issues that haunt humanity and chase the people into darkness. God allows death to affect Him and so that in His death, He can become closer to humanity. He is buried like humans so that finally He would defeat the power of death through the power of His life. This is to say, God comes to face the consequences of human choices.

Cross of Jesus is also God's identification with the humanity that is being mistreated and exploited by the majority of the society. It is God's identification with the powerless, weak, and all those minorities whose voices are silenced by the unjust, tyrant and violent ones who act like beasts that crush down the humans. God stands in silence letting the world to do its worst and bring out its cruelty upon Himself. He stands with all those who are forced by society to live in unwanted places. He experiences the fate of those who are rejected by society because they stand for justice and truth. He becomes a part of the human experience to see the world that is *forsaken by God*. When Jesus cries on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" he experienced the crux of human injustice and joined the voices of the poets, prophets and the exiled people who experienced the worst of the human world. On the cross, it seems as if God is too far from human suffering. But the fact is, God Himself has become the part of our suffering and our plight. He came to His own created world just to experience how worst it has become.

Finally, in concluding our discussion on the death of Jesus, it is evident that the cross of Jesus Christ is a revolution in the world then

and now. It challenges the human ways of defining power and kingdom and demythologizes them. The cross demonstrates human wickedness, sinfulness and corruption to the extent of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah and the Lord of the world. It is the demonstration of humans' rejection of God's Kingdom and His message. However, God's radicality supersedes human actions. He turns the cross into the demonstration of His selfless love to humankind. He uses the same means to redeem humans from sin and death. God turns out human violence against Him as the moment of expression of His glory, His power and His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This is the reason why the cross of Christ has become so central to the good news of God's Kingdom. The crucifixion is the moment when Jesus is highly exalted and the glory of God is revealed to all the flesh. God comes in the person of Jesus, treads on our paths and experiences death to identify with us and finally represent His way of creating new humanity after His pattern.

The crucifixion of Jesus has brought the climax to the narrative of the world's story in general and the narrative of God and Israel in particular. Jesus' death consummated the whole story of the Old Testament, never replaced it. But the new age has to be begun which happens in Jesus' resurrection.

### **5.5 DAWN OF THE NEW AGE**

Christian faith is not merely based on the cross of Jesus the Messiah but the resurrection of the Messiah. It is the resurrection of Jesus that brought meaning to the cross and became a foundation of the emergence of a new society, not merely a new faith. The resurrection of Jesus brought a whole new beginning, a new creation and a new life. Often many of the Christians in the popular culture give much emphasis to the cross that they almost forget the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. Yes, of course, the message of the cross is important but it gets its meaning in fullness because of the event that followed it. The climax of Jesus' story is not the cross but the resurrection.

There are a good number of liberal Christians and sceptics who simply deny or doubt the validity of Jesus' resurrection. They argue that the story of Jesus' resurrection has been developed by the later followers of Jesus Christ who wanted to popularize their leader and to propagate their newfound faith. Let me say, these are the post-modern views forced



on the ancient documents in the first century. First of all, we need to understand that ancient cultures were mostly honour-oriented. It is a culture where the defence of one's dignity and reputation plays a crucial role. For such people, shame is something inevitable. They cannot tolerate when they are put to shame. It pains much, as much as death. In such a setting, no one would ever project their leader as someone who is put to shame in the public. The crucifixion of Jesus was witnessed by a great number of people. It was a public execution, not something that happened in private. The crucifixion of Jesus was the reason why his disciples were greatly disappointed and almost lost all of their hopes. If the resurrection was a myth, hoax or hallucination that caused the beginning of a new religion, the answer would be the opposite.

We need to go back to the first century to read the gospels on their terms. If the resurrection was a myth as simple as something could make people believe in that, it would be impossible for the early Christians to digest the fact that Jesus died a criminal death and it was not so easy for them to develop a myth around him and hail him as the Lord of the world. Many Jewish leaders, prophets and messiahs have appeared on the scene before Jesus, in the time of Jesus and after him too. All of them have died a criminal death in the hands of their enemies being brutally executed. Their followers were scattered and their movements died with their leaders. Otherwise, the same followers revived their movements but under a new leader. This didn't happen with the Jesus movement. He too was executed, routinely, by the pagan imperial forces. However, no sooner than his execution, the movement of Jesus has revived again with a new life and new force. They did not find another leader to continue the same movement but acknowledged Jesus himself as their Lord and Messiah. Within no time, the message of Christianity began to flourish and even cross the boundaries of Judaism. This would not have happened if we pick out the centrality of resurrection from Jesus' life. Therefore, to deny the validity and message of Jesus' resurrection is to misinterpret the origins of the early Christian community.

Yes, of course, there are difficulties with the narratives of Jesus' resurrection in the four Gospel accounts. It is difficult to harmonize all of them to tell a systematic sequence. All of them have been narrated in different ways that we cannot be so accurate in developing a chronological sequence of what are the events that took place on the day when Jesus rose again from the dead. The story of Jesus' resurrection is told and

retold in the early Christian community in different ways in different circles. However, those underlying issues are not the reasons to deny the historicity and validity of Jesus' resurrection nor a base to simply deny the consistency of the Bible. Necessarily, there is also no need of harmonizing the resurrection accounts to frame a system. Rather we need to get involved in the story and look at how it has been told so that we can get the meaning rather than a simple historical framework.

The resurrection of Jesus marked a beginning for the climax of the old age and the inauguration of the new age. First of all, we need to understand the Jewish roots of resurrection. The resurrection in early Judaism is understood in a couple of ways: it meant the revival and restoration of the nation of Israel (as in Ezekiel 37) and is also referred to a point in the *end* when the loyal Jews and the Jewish martyrs will be brought back to life to continue their existence under the reign of God (as in Daniel 12). In some sense, both of these meanings point out to a time when the present age will be brought to a climax which marks the beginning of a whole new age. In Jesus, the Jewish eschatology is realized and inaugurated. The resurrection of Jesus is the eschatology *inaugurated* because it points out the end of the old and the beginning of the new. It is also the eschatology *realized* because the new beginning is already here and now. It is as if the future for which the people of God have waited has become reality on the person of Jesus the Messiah.

The resurrection is the point when Jesus is enthroned over the cosmos as the Lord. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus asserts that *all authority on earth and in heaven* has been given unto him. It is a way of saying that the Kingdom of God is *established* in and through him. In his resurrection, Jesus has announced his victory not only over Satan and Death but also over all the forces of the world that tried to suppress the beginning of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Now, Jesus sends his disciples to all the nations to announce this *good news* that God has become the in-charge of the world. It is as if a newly enthroned king sending heralds into the cities and villages of the kingdom to announce the beginning of a *new age*. This good news of Jesus as the Messiah and the Lord of all the nations will be proclaimed to the ends of the Roman Empire which is already celebrating its narrative of the *new beginning*.

In the Gospel of Mark, we find Jesus delegating his authority to his disciples to *work great things in his name* and also to proclaim the message of salvation through him. Salvation is not merely something that we understand it to be. It is *rescuing* the world from its consequences and the restoration of the whole world. Salvation, according to the New Testament, is never limited to accepting Jesus as a personal saviour. It is not merely personalizing the message of Jesus but to begin a new life that restores the brokenness of the world. Salvation is a condition that brings life into the world not only in the sense of restoring personal relationships with God but also in creating a stable society that corresponds to the vision of God for the whole world. Salvation is something that transforms human beings to *be humans*, bearing the image of God.

In Luke-Acts, we see the risen Jesus promising the *power* from above to his disciples as they continue to be the heralds of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God would not be as same as the people have expected it to be but it would be on terms of God and the basis of God's *power*. And this promise of Jesus opens up to the narrative of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples of Jesus the Messiah. A reversal of Babel happens there on the day of Pentecost. In the narrative of Babel in Genesis 11 the *unification of the nations* to build their empire by denying the vocation of God *resulted in their division, confusion and expulsion*. But here in Acts, on the day when the Spirit of the Lord descended on the followers of Jesus in the city of Jerusalem brought the *unification* of the divided communities. It was a time when the Jews from all over the Roman Empire came to Jerusalem to celebrate their feast of Pentecost. Since they were accommodated in the foreign nations, they spoke the language of the nations to which they have belonged. Now, on the same day, they listened to voices from a house in the city from where they heard people glorifying God in the languages of these *non-resident Jews* (Diaspora Jews).

The Spirit empowered these disciples of Jesus Christ to witness the works of the God of Israel in the native language of these peoples. This caused great astonishment among those who came to the room where the disciples were praising God to see what's going on. The message that was delivered by Peter to these people recounted the promise of God in the prophetic texts that He will bestow His Spirit to all the humans *at the end of the days*. The message also pointed out how in Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah, the whole narrative of the Old Testament was brought to its

climax and a new beginning has been inaugurated. Peter boldly claimed, "You have crucified *the* Messiah but God turned it upside down by raising Jesus from the dead and now Jesus is the Messiah and Lord of the world." This is a message of a revolution that brought many people to the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah and the Lord. When they were baptized and added into the community, it marked the beginning of the New Age. Indeed, the day when the *Spirit brought unification*, the returning Jews did not imitate the Babel rather they began to spread the message of this good news of the Kingdom of God that brings unity through the diversity of the human race.

Not so later, a vigorous Jewish nationalist, Saul of Tarsus, encounters the risen Jesus and becomes the adherent of the same faith which once he had denied and persecuted. The so-called conversion of Saul is not about his preference for one religion over the other. It is not about finding a *new God* or finding a new message rather it is a finding for which the whole Jewish nation has been searching for. It is a realization that Jesus is the true Israel in whom the whole of the narrative of God's people has come to its fulfilment marking a beginning to the new age. Saul of Tarsus, or Paul as known to the Roman world, travels through the provinces and cities of the Roman Empire announcing that Jesus is the Messiah and the Lord. He went to both Jews and the non-Jews (Gentiles) arguing and convincing that Jesus is the *true* Lord of the world. Finally, he reaches Rome, boldly proclaiming the *good news* of the beginning of a new Kingdom right in the city where the emperor is ruling and claiming to be the lord of the whole world.

The new beginning takes place at the very birth of Jesus, reaches to its fulfilment in his resurrection and waits for its ultimate consummation at the return of Jesus. Often the modern evangelical Christians speak about the virgin birth of Jesus to prove that Jesus is sinless. That may be right but that is not what the New Testament authors meant when they spoke of Jesus' birth. Such a view has been sprung from the Augustinian doctrine of *Original Sin* in the 4th century. (Although this doctrine gained popularity in Christianity, it diverts from the real message of the Bible, distorting the whole picture.) The virgin birth of Jesus has something to say other than the sinless state of Jesus in his birth. It is presented as a significant direction to a new social reality. It is a signpost to the new beginning that is about to inaugurate through this new human and the new king. It also points out the promise in the Garden of Eden in Genesis

which is about a seed of a woman who would crush the head of the serpent. The phrase 'seed of the woman' does not necessarily mean the virgin birth but a generic human being. Jesus, as the new human being, crushes down the serpent – he rejects its ideology to rule over the world on his terms distrusting God's definition of life and kingdom.

We Christians are domesticated with interpreting Jesus' birth and resurrection as *proofs* for Jesus' divinity. Yes, Jesus is God and his birth and resurrection are miraculous. But they are much more than simply defining his divine status. They are signposts to the new beginning, a whole new kind of existence that transcends the definitions of this world. The body of Jesus at his resurrection is not ethereal or nonphysical. It is a corporeal body yet transcends the normal existence. This is to show that the resurrection body of Jesus demonstrates continuity as well as discontinuity with the existing world. It is the physical body transformed into a *new mode of physicality*. It does not only point out to the future but also gives meaning to the present existence. The resurrection of Jesus is the evidence that the present world is not abandoned and it does not run meaninglessly waiting for a point of time to be destroyed. This is to say that the world is not to be *left behind* but to be transformed into a whole new creation at the return of Jesus the Messiah.

Let us turn to the Gospel of John and listen to what the writer has to say about the *new beginning* in Jesus. To begin with the opening poem (John 1:1-18), the writer presents Jesus as the Word made flesh. This does not merely point to the divinity of Jesus but also to his work. The Gospel is opened in such a way that it reflects the creation story in the Book of Genesis where God orders the chaos and darkness into a good and perfect world through His powerful Word. Through the Word of God, the darkness and chaos are transformed into light and life. Now the same Word, the embodiment of the creator, comes into the world that is once again filled with disorder and darkness. The Creator God steps into the world once again not to snatch away people from earth to heaven but to reconcile both spaces by bringing light and life into the world. God has pitched His tent among humans in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, is the bringer of new life. The term 'life' repeats several times throughout the narrative. It not only points out to God as the life-giver but also points to the fact that the *future is now and here*. We the modern readers of the Gospel of John have simply considered

the Gospel to be *spiritual* and *futuristic* and nothing to address the realities of the world and to answer the current issues as the Synoptic Gospels do. The fact is that the Gospel of John is so *earthly* and *reality*. The *eternal life* in the Gospel of John does not merely point out the so-called *going into heaven after death*. It points back to Genesis where humans have lost the life of God by choosing to define what is good on their terms instead of trusting God and ruling the world like Him. When it is said that eternal life is available through trust in Jesus Christ, the people and world are restored to the existence that once was lost. It is about sharing in the life of God and *living like God* not only in terms of immortality but also in terms of our existence in the world. Accepting Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God brings life into the world that happened to live in the grips of death because of the destructive consequences of human choices (John 20:30-31). Denying to believe in him is to be exposed to the consequences of our own choices that lead to death.

Jesus claims to be the giver of the water of life. Now, this also points back to Genesis where there was a river in the Garden of Eden that not only watered the garden but also brought life to the rest of the world. It also points out the vision of Ezekiel where he sees a river flowing out of the temple and bringing life to the whole land and sea. The water of life is something that flows out of the presence of God. It flows out from the place where God and humans meet and live together. Moreover, it is something that transforms the whole land and society. It is said that the water of life is about the Holy Spirit. It is the personal presence of God, energizing and empowering human beings to be the life-givers to society. While the world is in greed for more power, wealth and pleasure, it simply made the whole society and the land so lifeless that the humans have become the seat of death. The world has become more like a desert where life is not available. The greed of humans simply resulted in corruption, injustice, violence, immorality and beastliness because of which the world has become the worst place to live and the life-giving God is rejected. But in and through the Holy Spirit, the life flows into the world – people get liberated, the society is healed and there is a new life all over *here on earth*. The world becomes a better place with the *personal presence of God* in every individual.

In John 15, Jesus claims to be the *True Vine* and calls his followers to be the branches of this tree. This reflects the tree of life that was in the Garden of Eden and which the humans have lost because of their

greed and thirst for more power and complete independence from God. Following Jesus and obeying his commands would be the part of this Vine which is Jesus himself – the giver of life. Abiding in Jesus Christ is about sharing in his own life that brings light to the world and revives the people back to life. It is sharing in the tree of life and bears a fruit that restores society and restores the world.

After his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples who closed themselves in a room because of their fear. While they were gripped with fear, Jesus comes into their midst announcing *peace* to them. Then he *breathes on them* and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” This again points back to Genesis 2:7 and Ezekiel 37 where God breathes into the flesh and humans become the living beings. It is the beginning of life. Now when Jesus breathes on his disciples, he creates new humanity, with new life and carrying the presence of God in and through their physical bodies. It is an inauguration of a whole new way of living. It is living in the newness of humanity by sharing in the light and life of God to create a society that rightly corresponds to the vision of God for this world.

God so loved the world that He did not send His Son to snatch the people away from earth into His presence rather fill the earth with His glorious presence, overthrowing the evil ruler of this world so that He may restore the world to its goodness, light, life and make it a place where He and the people could live together by abiding in one another. The Gospel of John has a very deep message for the church and the society and if one pays attention to it and practices it, surely the *hope for the future* will be here and now.

Concerning the Holy Spirit, the people have limited the theme to personal pietism or the powerful ministry of sign and wonders. First of all, the Holy Spirit refers to the personal presence of God in each of the disciples of Jesus and the community of Christians. Having the Holy Spirit in us is nothing less than carrying the presence of God in and through our lives. When we look into the Luke-Acts, the presence of the Spirit of the Lord is something that liberates the people, stabilizes the society, and brings holistic healing to the individuals and the society. It is the spirituality that not only gets reflected in our individualistic ethics (honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, love, morality, etc.) but also gets demonstrated through our response to the situations in society. When it is said that the Spirit is the personal presence of God in His believers,

it is a demonstration of life that reflects the life of God. It is doing the things that God would do. It is responding to the situations as God would respond. It is delivering, healing and restoring the society as God would do it.

God is never unconcerned with the cries of the people that call for justice, peace and social action. He is never indifferent to society. What we fundamental Christians have made is that we defined the presence of the Holy Spirit as an *otherworldly life* making it too blind, deaf, dumb and stagnant to respond to the situations around us. This did not happen with the early Church. In Acts 3, we read Peter and John healing a crippled man. Generally, we interpret it in terms of *miracle* and *powerful ministry*. But it is much more than that. It is giving life to the person who is forced into unwanted places in society begging for mercy and compassion. While everyone simply thought of *doing some charity*, here we see the followers of Christ not doing some charity or doing some signs and wonders to get people's attention. Instead, they are restoring the person from that place giving him a new life. Of course, this is a miracle but not in the sense as we usually think. It is a demonstration of God's *power* in society. While society defines power as something that elevates their position in the world and brings people's attention to them, the *power* of the Kingdom of God is beyond human definitions. It is a power that gets demonstrated in terms of selfless love, generosity and healing.

I do not deny that the Spirit-filled life is a moral life that regenerates our whole being to reflect the moral and ethical life. But this personal pietism should not trade the social action nor must the social action be preferred over personal holiness. Spirit-filled life is not escapism from the world. It is living in the world of defilement, distortion, disappointments and ungodliness to lead a revolutionary life carrying the very presence of God in our lives.

In his letters to Ephesians and Colossians, Paul speaks of the dawn of the new age in terms of the new creation of human beings. In Christ, the people are transformed to bear the image of God. The new creation is all about the new humanity where society is focused on heavenly things. Focusing on heavenly things is not about abandoning the world but reflecting the life and nature of Jesus Christ on earth as it is in heaven. It is all about becoming salt and light to the world by presenting a life that corresponds to the vision of God.



To summarize the beginning of the New Age in and through Jesus the Messiah can be seen as a beginning of a new humanity, new society and a new creation that perfectly reflects the character of God. It is an inauguration of society where everyone's actions are driven by love and compassion. It is a society where there is no distinction between the rich and poor for all come together, contributing generously to one another in times of their needs. There are no enemies and no outsiders here. Enemies are forgiven and the outcasts are restored to society as they repent of their wrongdoings. Here is a society that serves one another without pride and selfishness. Everyone works for another as if they are working for the Lord. Everyone treats fellow humans as if they are treating God. Yes, there is a diversity of people – there are people from different socio-political and economic classes. There are Jews and non-Jews and Barbarians, there are men and women, there are masters and slaves, there are educated and uneducated, there are traders and peasants, and there are rich and poor. But no one considers his/her status as a hindrance to love the fellow brother or sister. Despite their differences, they all collectively bear one identity – new humanity and new creation. They take the hurt seriously. They pray for one another. They respect one another's dignity even though everyone is not equal in their position. They do not respond to violence with violence but with love. There is no hate speech, no immorality and no selfish greed in the community. Above all, they all carry the presence of God in and through their lives.

This is the new age that has been inaugurated and established in and through Jesus the Messiah. It is an elite vision. It invites everyone into the family of God and calls everyone to live a holy life, strongly opposing any issue that would contaminate the doctrine and society with falsified ideas. It is the theology and doctrine of the church that affects its attitude to fellow humans and towards society.

## 5.6 A NEW COVENANT

Whenever we hear the term 'New Testament' we generally remember the canonical collection of those 27 books in the second part of the Christian Bible. We seldom, or never, think of the meaning of that phrase *new testament* because we either ignore it or we have very less idea about it. The word *testament* is derived from the Greek term *diatheke* which means covenant – agreement, partnership or contract. Therefore the

term *new testament* simply means *new covenant*. Remember the promise in the prophetic texts that one day Yahweh would make a new covenant with Israel? This is the reality of what Israel's prophets had hoped for. In this section, we would explore the idea of the new covenant within the story of the Bible and before that, we will look at what the new covenant is not about.

It is generally said that the old covenant is the covenant of works and the new covenant is a covenant of grace. This idea has its foundations in the writings of Paul where he argues that the people are not saved by works but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This makes sense that the *covenant* is all about salvation and faith. While salvation is a part of the covenant, the covenant means much more than that. It's a partnership. It's an agreement to be together as long as the terms and conditions of the agreement are kept. It is valid as long as the partners are loyal to each other.

In this sense, God's partnership/covenant with Abraham and Israel was not based on works but the grace of the Lord. When God elected them they were not in a position of worth to partner with God because they were also a part of the grand rebellion of humankind that tried to seek independence from God. Abraham was a part of the scattered nations who also worshipped the deities of the pagan culture. God called him out as a representative of all those people to be a blessing for all the families on the earth. This is to say that God's covenant with Abraham and with Israel in the latter times was a covenant of grace because they were not elected because of their eligibility but were made eligible by God. What about the law? It must be seen within the covenantal relationship. The Law in the Old Testament was all about to define the people's relationship with God. They are the terms and conditions that validate the covenant. Even the new covenant has some principles to be kept which are summed up in one word – love.

The new covenant is not the replacement of the old one. We are often tempted to say that the 'old has gone and the new has come.' The Old has indeed been brought to its climax in Jesus the Messiah but it does not mean that the new has come to replace the old. When it is said that the Old is invalidated, abolished and undermined with the coming of the New, it is not to say that the Old has become void and nothing. The New is all about the fulfilment of the Old. It is not the replacement but

the consummation. When it is said consummation it points out the idea of a new beginning not merely to the complete full stop. The New is not another covenant but the fulfilment and continuation of the Old.

God entered into the covenantal relationship with Abraham to make him a new nation that partners with God in creating a society by the definition of God's character and vocation. The nation of Israel was a priestly kingdom that was supposed to demonstrate life to show what it means to be the people of Yahweh and how it looks like when Yahweh is God and King of the people. God has given the people a set of instructions to define their partnership with Him. We have already discussed them earlier to understand what they are all about. However, over time, the people failed to keep that covenantal partnership with Yahweh. Again and again, they proved themselves disloyal to their God by choosing different gods. The gods and kings of Israel had put them in a state of unholiness – no longer consecrated, dedicated, unique, and set apart for their God. They failed to demonstrate the uniqueness of their God because of the society that is built-in disloyalty to Yahweh.

All of this ended up with the exile – banishment from the land. Exile can be considered as driving out a disloyal partner out of the home. It was the darkest moment of the history of Israel because of which the whole of their future is disturbed and distorted. In such a setting of brokenness, shame, guilt, and disloyalty, the prophets envisioned a day when Yahweh would renew His covenant with Israel but it would be no longer based on the written law code but the new heart. Yahweh promised that He would inscribe His commandments on their heart and they no longer turn away from Him. It is like bringing a disloyal partner back home, forgiving all the wrongs and setting things right. However, this did not happen with the return from Babylon. Even though the people have come back to their homeland, rebuilt their city and the temple, they were still hoping for this moment of forgiveness, restoration and renewal of the covenant.

It is nearly a half-millennium later, a person appears on the scene with whom all these things initiate. In the person and work of Jesus, it is as if the broken covenant is being set right. Jesus appears to be the true and loyal Israel who is bringing the story of the Old covenant to its climax by drawing up the whole narrative of the Old Testament to himself. He fulfils all the requirements of the partnership although not as legalistic as the religious leaders but as compassionate as God.

Jesus forms a new society, the people of the new covenant. They are not of different people who are unaware of the Old covenant. They are the remnant of Israel. They are the true Israel who obeyed the voice of Jesus and accepted him to be their Messiah. They are the ones who expressed their trust in the life and teachings of Jesus and they are the ones who turned around from *their* definition of religion and society. They are the people who showed their acceptance to the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus and accepted his definition of politics, economics and social values. This is to say, the people of the new covenant are the *remnant* who repented and obeyed the voice of their Messiah.

We have already discussed the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus which criticized the Jewish nation in general. Both of them were clear at one point that the time has come when the Kingdom of God will be established but the inhabitants of this kingdom would no longer be the Jews in general. The point has come when the Jewish nation will be cut off as the people of God. I think I need to be careful with my words here. I am not taking the stance of anti-Semitism here. I am not an anti-Israeli. I am completely against that notion. Nor am I taking the stance of those pro-Israel who always try to define the achievements of Israel today within the concept of their election to be the people of God.

The message of John and Jesus was not odd when understood in the context of the Hebrew Bible. They were simply standing in the tradition of the prophets who vehemently criticized the position of Israel as the people of God when they were doing all sorts of things that are against Yahweh's vision for the society. Just consider Amos who nearly equated the nation of Israel along with other nations and pronounced destruction of the people and the land (Amos 9:7-10). What we see in the message of the prophets are demythologization and disillusionment. They demythologized the view of the Day of the Lord. Day of the Lord can be understood as a day when God would judge the whole earth and vindicate the righteous and the oppressed, delivering them from the hands of their enemies. The majoritarian society of Israel has always interpreted the Day of the Lord to be a day when they will be delivered from their enemies and God would make them a supreme nation. The prophets stood against this view that the Day of the Lord is the day of destruction for this majoritarian society because of its injustice, ungodliness, corruption and all kinds of evil practices that have become a threat to God's vision for a just society.

Similarly, John and Jesus criticized the national narrative of Israel in the first century. The majoritarian society was looking forward to a Davidic King to come and wage war against Romans delivering the people of God from all of their enemies, making them a supreme nation in the world. The worst is that they were expecting God and His Messiah to act on their definitions of what is acceptable and unacceptable. They were expecting to be the heirs of the Kingdom of God not genuinely giving up their aspirations for power, wealth and pleasure that created a society that is far more beyond the expectations of God. Thus, Jesus, just as his forerunner John the Baptist, was calling the people to repent. They are called to give up their national narrative which is all about *us against them*. However, it is the remnant of Israel that was ready to repent and accept Jesus as their King.

With this remnant, the new covenantal relationship is inaugurated. It is not an anti-Jewish covenant but the definition of who is truly Jewish. While the nation defined Jewishness in terms of their ethnicity and work, the new covenant defines Jewishness based on the people's response to the vision and work of God in and through Jesus the Messiah. To be precise, the new covenant has been initiated not merely with the followers of Jesus but with Jesus himself because he is the true and loyal Israelite who brought the whole of God's Kingdom to its fullness.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says that he would build his church. It is often thought that the New Testament Church is different from Israel. Some say that the Church is the replacement of Israel. Dispensationalists tend to differentiate between both Israel and the Church, saying that they are based on two different covenants. But the fact is neither if these views are right. Because the Church is neither the rejection of Israel nor different from Israel. The Greek word *ekklesia* is rendered as *a church*. However, the word *ekklesia* has no greater meaning in it. It simply refers to an assembly or a people that is called out. In other words, the word church refers to a society of people coming together with a specific purpose. The word has no spiritual meaning. But when Jesus said, "I will build *my church*", that makes the difference. The Church (*ekklesia/assembly*) of Jesus is something different from all other churches (*assemblies*) in the world.

Thinking a little closer, the church is the people who are called out. When this is said within the first-century Jewish setting, it refers to a group of people, a remnant who constitute the true people of God. Jesus

chooses twelve disciples from Israel which would mean nothing more than the initiation of new Israel. The Church, therefore is the remnant of Israel who repented and accepted the good news of the Kingdom of God and this church expanded beyond the ethnic borders of Israel including the Gentiles to the family of God.

The Church in the New Testament is not entirely new. There is no time to mark the beginning of the Church because it already began in the hope of the remnant in Israel that God would renew His covenant with them. It is always a remnant who accepts the message of God and is willing to amend their ways.

There is, therefore, no need to ask after the origins of the Church as though it were founded on a given date, say with Peter's confession (Matt. 16:16-17) or at Pentecost (Acts 2; cf. 1:8)... It began in those few about Jesus who had been obedient to the call of the Kingdom. Nay, it began in the Old Covenant itself and in the Old Testament longing for the true Israel of God's purpose.<sup>5</sup>

In the Synoptic Gospels, we see Jesus having his last supper with his disciples. He blesses the cup and says that it is the blood of the new covenant. The symbolic language of Jesus echoes the moment of exodus where the Passover Lamb is slaughtered and the slaves were liberated from the land of Egypt. This exodus continues to the covenant, vocation and concludes with the immediate Presence of God among the people. The new covenant also echoes the same event when the people are brought into the covenantal relationship with God. In the Gospel of John, we have Jesus issuing the new commandment which is to love one another as he loved them (John 13:34). All of this unanimously upholds the fact that the long-awaited new covenant has come to its fulfilment in and through Jesus.

When we read through the Book of Acts, we see a Jewish Christian named Paul travelling throughout the Roman Empire and preaching the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah which has inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. It is an announcement that the new age has begun. There we find many Gentiles

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<sup>5</sup> John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 225.

being added into the Church through their trust in Jesus the Messiah. The Church, therefore, transcends the ethnicity of Israel bringing all the people into the covenantal partnership with God. In this sense, neither Jews nor Gentiles are superior to one another. While the Jews are those who responded to the call of the Messiah into the Kingdom, the Gentiles are those who are added into this family through their faith in Jesus the Messiah. This is why Paul writes in his letter to Romans that the Gentiles are the branches of the wild tree attached to the Olive tree which is a way of saying that the Gentiles are the part of God's people (Romans 11). This is to say both Jews and Gentile in the church become one family of God despite their differences.

Paul in his letters speaks about the believers being justified through their faith. Both Jews and Gentiles alike are justified by their trust in Jesus the Messiah. Being justified refers to being set right before God. In simple words, the justification means that the people are brought into the family of God, not because of their ethnic identity but because they trust in Jesus and are willing to follow this true Israel and the Lord of the world. It is to show one's allegiance to Jesus Christ. However, justification by faith not by works does not give room for *a life of free choices*. When Paul says that the people are not justified by their works, he refers to the ethnic identity as Jews. Like Moses, Jeremiah and Jesus, Paul criticizes those who base their ethnicity and traditions to define themselves as the people of God. While circumcision and the ritual practices define one's identity within the people, they do not define one's identity as belonging to God. It is by meeting the requirements of God people get their identity as God's people. Therefore, it is by showing allegiance to Jesus the Messiah, the true Israel and the true Lord of the world, people are set right.

Allegiance to Jesus does not simply mean *faith in one's heart* but also to *faithfulness to God* by following the life and teachings of Jesus. By sharing in the Spirit of Christ, all the people become the children of God. Living by Spirit refers to fulfil the requirements of God which are not about the ritual practices but about the life that God demands. When Paul says that the old covenant has become obsolete, he does not refer to the message of the law but to the ritual practices that are connected with it. As in the days of the prophets, Jews (not all) took the ritual practices for granted to define their identity as God's people. When it is said that they disobeyed the law and broke the covenant, it means that they are very eager to practice the rituals (not works of righteousness) and deny the

vision and requirements of being God's people that are expressed through the demands of the law. This is what Paul means when he says that the *law is abolished with its works* in Christ.

Jesus has become the personification of the law and showed what it means to be a true Israelite. Therefore, by following Christ and living by the Spirit, one fulfils all the law that is not necessarily bound to the ritual works. Moreover, trusting Jesus does not call people to live as they like but the faith in Jesus must be expressed through works. We cannot make a sharp distinction between faith and works. Faith and faithfulness in Christ are not all about *trust in heart*, not all about a personal relationship with God but it is about the trust and loyalty expressed through actions. In other words, being justified by faith is becoming Israel by heart and spirit through allegiance to Jesus the Messiah.

The people of the new covenant, therefore, stand as the true and loyal partners of God who follow Jesus Messiah. It is the renewal of the partnership with God that has been rejected by many in the past. The church, again and again, is admonished to stand in unity and love. There are differences in the Church: there are masters and slaves, men and women, Jews and Gentiles, Hebrews and Greeks, rich and poor. But despite the differences, they all bear one identity through their adherence to the gospel of the Kingdom. When we go to the first pages of the Bible, we see God creating human beings in His image and likeness to partner with Him in ruling over the world and blessing them to be fruitful and multiply. Practically, when human beings multiply, there will be differences between races, tribes, nations and classes in society. Moreover, the first human beings are created differently as male and female. However, despite their differences, they all bear one identity – the image of God.

The Church, therefore, stands in that theme of bearing a collective identity as the people of God in a world that is filled with violence, disturbance, broken relationships, rivalries, competitions, factions and all sorts of things that disrupt the unity in the society. This is the reason why the early Christian writers in the New Testament harshly opposed factions, disharmony, injustice, immorality, racial superiority and impurity in the church. They were too quick to respond to the issues in the churches in the first century that devalue the identity of the people of God. The new covenant, therefore, is fundamentally based on the principle of love.



The false teachers and false apostles are vehemently criticized not only because they taught wrong things but also because they caused factions within the church and led the people away from their calling to be the people of the new covenant, polluting the *truth*.

The new covenant, therefore, is a call to be one body, to be of one mind and to serve one another. The Church stands as a society within the society that is partnering with God in bringing light and life to the world. The vision of God for the Church is the same vision that is expressed in the Old Testament and the life and teachings of Jesus the Messiah. The new covenant also has a vocation to be the salt and light of the world. The church is called to be the Kingdom and Priests who are liberated by God from the powers and principalities of the dark forces and they also represent the life of God on earth as it is in heaven.

This new covenant will not be abolished not because of the excellence of the followers of Jesus but because of the excellence of Jesus the Messiah. The new covenant is inaugurated and established with the very person of Jesus of Nazareth who was the true and loyal partner to God. Since it began with a perfect partner, it will stand forever. People share in this covenant by showing their allegiance to Jesus and sharing in his righteousness. This is to say, the New Covenant is not based on the people who can fail God in partnering with Him but on the perfect human being who is loyal and steadfast. By putting their trust in Jesus the Messiah, people are set right with God to partner with Him. However, somehow, Jesus himself is God and also the perfect partner.

## 5.7 CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

We call Jesus the Saviour of the world. The very name Jesus means Yahweh saves or Yahweh is the saviour. What then is salvation? Salvation refers to rescue from danger. God's salvation is not about escaping from the world but rescuing the world from danger. We need to look back to the opening of the Bible to understand the meaning, need and purpose of salvation. In the beginning, God created heaven and earth – a perfect reality that is filled with goodness. It is the world that was a habitable place for both and human beings to live together. Humans are created in the image and likeness of God to rule and guard the creation like God. They are to act as God's agents of demonstrating His life and His Kingdom by depending on God's definition of goodness. When humans

sought *freedom from God* and chose to do what is good in their own eyes, it disturbed the created order and disturbed human society. Things went too far from the way God wanted the world to be. Humans began to choose gods of their likeness and they rejected Yahweh's vocation.

Sin and evil began to dominate the world. Although God wanted to reform it by making people His partners and restore the world to its original state of goodness, perfection and order, oftentimes humans failed God because they distrusted His definition of life. Sin is something that disturbs society, not the sinner himself. When a person sins, the first effect of the sinful act falls on the person against whom the sin is committed. For instance, if someone speaks lies, it is not the liar who gets affected by it first but the one who has been deceived. In other words, human intentions, choices and actions define the way how society is built. If the human intentions, choices and actions do not align with the goodness of keeping and guarding the creation and relationships, it leads to disturbed and broken relationships and finally making the society an unfit place for humanity to exist in peace.

Nevertheless, God, as portrayed in the Bible, is an *unsettling God*. For Him, the world is not something to be abandoned. He does not stretch back from His work in the human world and from another world that is filled with loyal ones. Again and again, He comes to *save*, to rescue, this world from the danger of *decreation* and *destruction* because of its intentions and choices. In a world where people fail to partner with God, He demonstrates Himself to be the faithful one – the trustworthy one. He does not abandon the world but tries to set it right and restore it to the original goodness. Salvation, therefore, is not an escape from the broken world into a better world but it is all about healing the broken world and restoring it to the goodness and perfection that was lost. This is to say, salvation is more *earthly*. It is the vision of heaven to make a home on earth rather than calling people from earth to find a place in a different and spiritual world.

Salvation, therefore, is a healing of the broken world through forgiveness and setting people right so that they can partner with God in bringing His vision to completion. It is rescuing people to turn around from making wrong choices and come to trust in God's definition of good and evil so that the world can become a better place for both God and humans to make a home together. It is also rescuing people from the

consequences of their own choices when they truly desire to be saved. It is not rescuing people from this world into another world rather it is rescuing people from their incapability to partner with God. Humans are ought to become *humane* by demonstrating what it means to be *the image and likeness of God*. Humans are God's counterparts on earth who, somehow, share the vision of God so that heaven and earth can become one. To say in one word, salvation is *humanization*. It is rescuing people from their *beastly nature* and choices that make the world lifeless, dead, dark and chaotic.

The followers of Jesus, the Church of the Messiah, are called to live a life on earth that corresponds to the vision of God as expressed in and through the life and work of Jesus. They are supposed to live a *new life* that demonstrates the heavenly life on earth. Setting eyes upon things that are above is not a call for being *otherworldly* but to live on earth as if they are the people of heaven. It is not a call to become indifferent to society and be satisfied with individualistic and personal pietism rather demonstrate the life that is transformed by the vision of God.

The Christians are supposed to bring life and light into this world. If they become indifferent by themselves and satisfied with accepting Jesus as a *personal saviour* and denying the dimensions of Jesus as the *cosmic saviour*. Christians are not called to bring *souls* but to form a *human society*. Personal salvation must affect the social relationships, social actions and the way how the Church responds to the issues in the society. The followers of Jesus are called to heal the sick, cast out the demons and to announce the good news that God is the King. Oftentimes, the healing of the sick and casting out demons are understood in *mystified* terms and completely deny their social aspect. I do believe that the miracles happen, healing of the sick takes place and the demons will be cast out. But I also believe that these actions are more than miracles and are the signs of *God's power in delivering the people*. While the powers of this world *oppress the people*, the followers of Jesus are empowered with the *authority of God* to deliver the people and *socialize the desocialized*.

The Church is not an aggregate of *individuals* rather it is a *society within the society*. It is a culture within the culture and it is the representative of the Kingdom of God. This is to say, the life within the Church must demonstrate to the world what it means to be the People of God and what it means when God is the in-charge of this world. It is not merely a group

of people coming together with a common intention of worshipping God rather a fellowship where every single person is concerned about their fellow brothers and sisters. A follower of Jesus Christ finds his/her identity within his/her community just as his/her identity is defined by family, region, language, state and nationality. Salvation affects the way one relates to the other members of the Church. In other words, Church is an alternative society and it forms a fellowship of *a new humanity* that works together in bringing life into the lifeless world and shines in the darkness as the life of this society contrasts with the notion of the popular society that is *individualistic, indifferent* and *uncompassionate*.

Paul defines the Gospel/Good News of Jesus Christ as the *power* of God to *rescue* the world and to set it right (Rom. 1:16-17). For all those who put their trust in Jesus, it is the righteousness of God. It has the power not only to transform individuals but also to transform the whole society by redefining their visions and aspirations so that they correspond to restoring the lost goodness of the world. The world is not something that is to be abandoned by the church. It is not even about escaping into a place where we can find perfect order rather partnering with God in forming such a society by sharing in the *Wisdom of God* which is unlike the *wisdom of the world*. Gospel is not only about proclaiming salvation but it's announcing that God is the King/ruler of this world and returning to His vision can help people in healing themselves and healing the society. Gospel is the gift of God and His *relentless faithfulness* to restore the *earth*.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says that the people of God are the citizens of heaven and it is from there, they are expecting a Saviour to come who is the Lord Jesus Christ who can transform the mortal bodies into glorious bodies (Phil. 3:20). Many times Christians try to give it a meaning as "the earth is not our home but heaven is. We are staying here on earth, but for a temporary period. Our ultimate destination is heaven." Well, that might be true but this is not what the text means to the Philippian audience. Let us make a brief analysis of this text, although not a very detailed exegetical interpretation, to understand the meaning of it and see how that fits the overall picture of the biblical narrative.

Philippi was a city that was a Roman colony in Paul's day (Acts 16:12). While the civil wars of Roman Republican culminated in the emergence of the Roman Empire in 31 BC, many Roman soldiers and

veterans found their home in the city of Philippi which was originally a Greek city. Because of the overpopulation in the city of Rome, there was a large deficiency of resources to meet the needs of the people which made Caesar send out people into different cities in the Empire. One of such cities was Philippi. Although it was inhabited by Romans soldiers already, there was an influx of new people from Rome who came and settled in the city of Philippi as many of them lost the lands due to the reforms in Rome.

As the Roman soldiers and veterans began to settle in Philippi, the city was made a Roman colony and considered as the *extension of Rome*. Therefore the city had received many benefits in the Empire as it was operated by Roman law. As the city was a Roman colony, it was exempted from many of the taxes. Thus this Greek city was brought under the influence of a foreign culture – the Roman culture. Although it had become a foreign colony, the citizens of Philippi did not express their animosity towards Romans as they were proud of it to be called the extension of the centre of the Empire. Nobody would have attempted to drive out Romans from the city. Therefore, the citizens of Philippi were proud of the status and dignity of their city and they were also proud of themselves to be called citizens of Rome.

Those who have settled in a Roman colony such as Philippi never hoped that they would return to their city of origin. Instead, they lived by the principles and laws of Rome. Now, whenever these citizens in a Roman colony face a crisis or a threat from the outside, Caesar would come to save them. These citizens do not need escaping into Rome because the colonies were also part of the centre of the Empire. Therefore, these citizens would eagerly wait for their lord and saviour Caesar not with an intention that he would take them back to Rome but rescue them from all the serious dangers. When Caesar comes to a Roman colony, it is like the emperor reclaiming his territory for himself and not leaving it to the enemy states.

Keeping this setting of the city of Philippi, let us reread the text that was addressed to the church in this city. When Paul says that the members of the church at Philippi are the citizens of heaven, he is paralleling it with what the city has been enjoying right now. While the citizens of Philippi are proud of Roman citizenship and living in the city not by the laws formulated by themselves but by the law of Rome, the church in this city told them to be having *citizenship in heaven*. Citizenship does

not, in the Philippian context, refer to origin and destination but refers to *belongingness*. The church is, therefore, a colony of heaven on earth. They are to abide by the rules that are set forth by God.

The Church is expecting their Saviour Lord Jesus Messiah from heaven to come, rescue them and transform their bodies to reflect His glory. The language used here is a kind of imperial language. While the citizens of Philippi are in confidence that when they happen to be in trouble their lord and saviour comes from Rome, the church is confident that its Lord and Saviour come from heaven to rescue them. The titles Lord, Saviour and Liberator are the titles of the Roman Emperor but Paul revolutionarily attributes these elite and imperial titles to Jesus which makes it clearer that the church of Philippi must bear the citizenship of a heavenly reign that is inaugurated and established by Jesus the Messiah.

Expecting a Saviour from heaven does not mean that the church will be taken into heaven because that is not what it means when the citizens of the Roman colony expect Caesar to come and rescue them. It is a point of time when the Lord Jesus Christ saves His citizens by reclaiming the world to Himself. The *Parousia* (coming of the Lord) of Jesus is told in contrast with the *parousia* of Caesar.

This point is further explained that the Lord will transform our mortal bodies into glorious ones by his power that conquers everything (Phil. 3:21). It is not destroying the earthly bodies rather transforming them into heavenly bodies. This power of resurrection shows, once again, that the earth is not to be abandoned and *left behind* but the power of God's faithfulness results in the transformation of the world. What is mortal will be absorbed by what is immortal. What is perishable will be absorbed by that which is imperishable. What is temporal will be absorbed by the eternal.

This picture of *citizenship* fits the overall picture of the Bible. It is a call for the Church to demonstrate life as if it belongs to heaven. Christians ought to colonize the earth with heavenly life. It is not in waiting for us to leave this world and go to another world rather it is in hope for the Lord Jesus Christ to come to the earth to reclaim everything to himself which marks an *ultimate end* to the powers of this world and the inaugurated Kingdom of God will be consummated. Being citizens of heaven is becoming *revolutionarily* a representatives of different politics, of different economics, and of different society that is set in contrast with the politics,

economics and society of this world. When we become representatives of the politics of heaven, we do not necessarily wage a military war against the existing politics of *oppression and domination* instead it is disagreeing with the selfish and greedy motifs of this world and form an alternative society where the heavenly life is demonstrated.

The church must align with God's Kingdom and His vocation. Church, not the building but the *ekklesia* (community), is also the temple of God. This is to say, the church is a place where God and the people dwell together. It is a sacred space and a place on earth that overlaps with heaven. It is a place where heaven and earth come together. If the church is a sacred space all over different parts of the world, then the church as a society must be ordered to reflect the presence of God in the community. The faith and practice of the church have to demonstrate how it looks like when God is with the people. It is not an abstract presence of God but the personal presence of God within the church and every individual. Therefore the people of God ought to behave on earth as if they are in heaven because a temple is a place where God's space overlaps human space. Moreover, if the Christians are the citizens of heaven, surely, then the presence of the Church on earth is the extension of heaven. In other words, living as the citizens of heaven is show that the earth also belongs to God it is a life *on earth as it is in heaven*.

We are not ought to dominate like all others in the world but rather become the agents of God's peace, compassion, justice and service. We do not necessarily force all others to become like us through the means of aggressive conversions (I'm not against evangelism and sharing the good news) rather become salt and light of the world which gives taste and brightness in the world that has broken down, became lifeless, and dark because of the selfishness, greed, injustice, oppression and ungodliness. We are supposed to make the earth the colony of heaven where the people are truly loyal to God and live in hope for that day when Jesus returns, not to take us into another world, but to transform this world into his glorious kingdom.

## 5.8 HEAVEN AND EARTH RE-UNITED

What is the ultimate vision of the Bible? What on earth is it waiting for? What is the ultimate Christian hope? What is the climax of the whole biblical message and how does it affect us? Well, the answer to these

questions is found at the very beginning of the biblical narrative. What we see on the first page of the Bible is the same thing for which the last page of the Bible is waiting for. It is the hope for the reunification of earth and heaven with God on the throne and the people ruling on earth as partners with God. It is a climatic restoration of the whole universe back to its original state of goodness – order and perfection. It is recreating the world which has been *decreated* because of the crooked and perverted choices of human beings all through history. In this part, we will deal with some very important yet very misunderstood topics of the Bible. We are going to discuss hope, apocalyptic eschatology and the return of the Messiah.

Everyone in the world is familiar with the word *hope*. It can be defined as an expectation for good times to come. It is an anticipation for the change and newness in anything. Hope can also be a vision of a person or a community that disagrees with what is happening here and now. Take Karl Marx for instance, he wanted to see society without economic classification and we call it his vision and his hope. Therefore, vision and hope are the different sides of the same coin. Hope begins with imagination and ends with anticipation for the same.

However, the hope in biblical terminology is more than anticipation for the good days to come. It is deeply rooted in the character of God and the people's faith in Him. The hopeful imagination of the people of God and the prophetic visions were driven by their traditions of faith and their understanding of who God is and what He does. Firstly, they had a clear understanding of what God has done in the past. They were not bound to the traditional way of thinking and perceiving the world; rather they saw things as if they were seeing with the eyes of God. They believed that God had created and fashioned the good world that was perfect, peaceful and a home for both God and humans. They believed that this God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, overflowing with loyal love and trustworthiness yet He could not tolerate when the world is being decreed because of human rebellion. He cannot tolerate when He sees people being divided among themselves, exploiting each other and creating a society that is not according to His vision for the good and ordered world.

With this faith and with their trust in God's stable character, they began to develop a hopeful imagination for the future of restoration,



forgiveness, peace and renewal of the whole creation. They confronted the people with this hope but such hope was both good news as well as bad news. It is a piece of good news for those who remain loyal to God, those who suffer tyranny and injustice at the hands of the powerful ones. It is a piece of bad news for those who choose to desocialize, decreate and dismantle the goodness of the created world. Because of their choices, they face the consequences of their actions. Unless they repent of their ways and turnaround from their actions and become human beings, they cannot find peace in the future because they did not choose it at the present. Therefore, hopeful imagination is not something that calls people for becoming mere spectators of what and how God is going to restore the world but it is also a call for individual and social action to collaborate with God in making that vision a reality. Thus, as the German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann says,

That is why faith, whenever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart in man [*sic*]. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but began to suffer under it, to contradict it.<sup>6</sup>

By the above words, it is clear that biblical hope does not agree with reality as it is looking for the reality that aligns with the vision of God for the world. It also calls people to break with reality and live an alternative life which makes their hope a reality. Biblical hope, in its basis, does not promise success to the people who are rich, powerful and dominant but life and liberation for those who are being oppressed, persecuted, and victimized in the hands of these selfish and greedy powers of the world. It is because the biblical hope is based on the justice and righteousness of God, not on the aspirations of the majoritarian society.

This hope is further developed into *apocalyptic eschatology* which is another important theme in the Scriptures yet the most misunderstood one than any other. The word *apocalypse* simply means ‘revealing, unveiling or uncovering something that was hidden.’ It is a very general term. For example, it is showing what happened behind the scenes of some movie. The second word *eschatology* comes from the Greek word *eschaton* which simply means an end. It may be the end of a queue,

6 Jurgen Moltmann, AZQuotes.com, Wind and Fly LTD, 2021. <https://www.azquotes.com/quote/516235>, (accessed on 01/03/2021 at 17:44)

the end of a particular period, or anything else. *Eschatology* refers to the talk about the *end*. In the Jewish and Christian circles, it is about the end of the age, not the end of the world. It is also about the end of *evil* in the world. When we combine *apocalypse* and *eschatology*, it simply means uncovering the reality behind the circumstances taking place in the world and leading up to the visions about the end of the age.

The apocalyptic eschatology is not about a systematic framework of what would take place in the future. Instead, it is about how the age of this evil would come to an end. Yet it is not designed to give a precise timetable about the end of the world. There is no concept in the Scriptures such as *the end of the world* because the Jewish faith, which was later adopted by Christians, did affirm that God has created the world and saw it as very good. It is their faith that God will not destroy what He has created. However, it is because of the human choices and the influence of evil in the world, the created order is being reversed and leading finally to chaos and nothingness. At the end, when evil does its worst, God hands over the world to the consequences of its intentions and actions because of which it seems that the world is going to be destroyed. But when evil is demonstrated in its peak level, God intervenes in human history bringing an end to all the evil in the world and creating a new heaven and a new earth. The new heaven and new earth are not the replacement of the old but the transformation and transfiguration of the world into a renewed existence that reflects the goodness of the creation that was in the beginning. Therefore, according to apocalyptic eschatology, the world is not *left behind* to be destroyed and annihilated but it longs for the time of renewal and restoration.

Apocalypticism enjoyed a significant role in Jewish eschatology. It is easy to assume that the birth of apocalypticism took place when the bitter experiences of the people under the foreign imperial tyranny made them feel the poison of evil in the world. They had lost their confidence in the prophetic promises of future hope and restoration. Their faith and hope faced a severe crisis that they were deeply frustrated. It was during such crucial times that apocalypticism developed dramatically to restore the people's hope by projecting the sovereignty of God in the present age and beyond history. In other words, apocalypticism was born as the Jewish hope took a new form of expression. It sustained and ventilated the dying hope when everything around seemed to be hopeless and leading to chaos. It also sustained Jewish eschatology by affirming God's rule to

history's end and even beyond.

The apocalyptic literature is a literature of resistance against the tyranny of the socio-political and religious-economic policies of their day. Since the people were under continuous oppression, the religious people were being forced to become apostates, and the ideology of the emperors was nothing but to rule with injustice, violence and subjection of the people by equating themselves with God, the apocalyptic emerged as a counter-narrative and resistance against such evil forces. The apocalyptic warned their audience not to partake in the coming destruction of evil by compromising with the beastly power of the imperial regime. The political powers were demonized by the apocalyptic writer to protest against their ideology. The apocalyptic imagination was just like an insignificant weapon that fought against imperialism. Though the apocalypses were not so popular, they uprooted the ideology of the contemporary world by envisioning an alternative and transformed world.

Apocalyptic eschatology, therefore, is not a presentation of *comfort through escapism*. It does not offer people of God a hope of *escaping from this world* into another rather they use the symbolic and sometimes otherworldly language to communicate what is taking place on earth and to call people to resist the evil forces that are behind all the *beastly* imperial regimes of the world. The loyal people of God are not told that they would *escape* from the world while the earth is left to be destroyed rather they become part of the sufferings and tribulations in the world yet triumph over them through their loyalty to God and the Messiah by resisting any influence that tries to lessen their devotion and loyalty to Jesus the Messiah. Instead of escaping, they are called to *bear witness* to their faith even to the extent of becoming martyrs. Witnessing is not only about proclaiming the *good news* of the Kingdom of God but also stand as representatives of the rule of God right by not accepting the ideology of the Empires of the world.

This is a brief glimpse of the apocalyptic eschatology which ends with the vision of new heaven and the new earth where God and the people live together without any fear of evil in the world. It is a vision for the consummation of the present age and the grand establishment of the new age which has already been inaugurated with Jesus the Messiah. It is the *utopian* age where there is no suffering, injustice, oppression, idolatry, indifference, darkness, disorder and death. Apocalyptic literature is a

parable, not an earthly with heavenly implications but a heavenly story with earthly implications. The *utopian* vision is mostly of the minority people who taste the domination and injustice of the majoritarian society. This vision may seem to be so insignificant but it dramatically attacks all the self-made and self-proud powers of the world when it is rightly interpreted. The apocalyptic eschatology is just like singing a funeral song for a person who is still alive because it *sings an end to the present world disorder*.

The return of Jesus the Messiah must be understood against this background. The return of Jesus Christ is the return of the *Lord* and *God* who comes not only to rescue His citizens on earth but also to renew the earth and bring a grand climax to the narrative of the world by restoring the creation to its goodness. It is not for *taking away His Church into another place* rather it is *returning to this world* to establish His reign all over the world which is renewed and transformed. Just as the Caesar of Rome comes to the Roman colonies to rescue his citizens there, not to take them back to his city, the return of Jesus the Messiah is also told in such a fashion. It is true that those who die in Christ live in some other world and rest there, yet it is not the final destination of every single human being. The return of Jesus is all about bringing restoration, renewal and heaven down to earth and not about taking individuals from earth into heaven and leaving the world behind to be destroyed. It is the just, righteous and *humane* people who inhabit the renewed creation and will enjoy the return of the Messiah.

The return of Jesus Christ is the final establishment of His Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven with a people whose bodies are renewed and transformed and live in a whole new creation. The Kingdom of God that was inaugurated during the life and times of Messiah, the Kingdom would come to its consummation with the defeat of the final enemy of humanity – the death itself. Finally, in and through the return of Jesus the Messiah, God makes His home on earth among this renewed humanity and the whole creation is restored as it was in the beginning. The return of Jesus, therefore, is also good news to the whole creation for it will be delivered from those who destroy it. The Kingdom of God brings destruction to the *destroyers* (Rev. 11:17-18).

The biblical hope emphasizes more on *God coming to dwell among human beings* rather than *humans going to dwell with God*. As I stated

frequently, it is not people going into heaven but heaven coming onto the earth. The biblical narrative ends with the vision of the new heaven and the new earth with new heaven coming down to earth and God dwelling among His people. It is a vision of reunification of God's space and our space with no need for the temple because God will be all in all. It is also a vision of God ruling the whole creation along with human beings with all beastly imperial regimes destroyed. The Bible does not end with the vision of the *end* but with the vision of *the end that inaugurates a new beginning*. In other words, the narrative of the Bible ends with the anticipation of the new creation, new beginning and new life.

The vision of the new creation is not a vision of another world rather it is a vision and hope for an *alternative existence* of this present world which makes it look differently ordered and perfected beyond the definitions of the present age. It is not an idle vision for comforting a soul but a powerful weapon that confronts the realities and breaks with the popular ideal of the world. This vision of a new heaven and the new earth does not call people to escape from the world but to begin an *alternative existence* right now and here waiting for its consummation in the future. It is not a call to remain quiet and indifferent but a call for a revolutionary confrontation with the beastly powers.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly,*

*the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.” (Rev. 21:1-8)*

*I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day — and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life. (Rev. 21:22-27)*

*Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:1-5)*

## CHAPTER SIX

# RESCUERS IMPRISONED

Having done an excursus through the biblical narrative and its relevance for today's society, we have done a brief study of the message of the Bible. The Bible stands as a witness to the revelation and intervention of God in our history, our space and in our times. It also stands as a window to understanding the vision of God for His people and the whole cosmos. We have analysed that the Church is the representative of God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven by demonstrating what it means and how it looks like when God is the in-charge of this world and reclaiming the world back to Himself. The Church stands as a kingdom of priests, salt and light in the world to disseminate life and presence of God on earth. The People of God carry the personal presence of God within every individual believer and within the community to demonstrate what it means and how it looks like when God makes His home on earth as it is in heaven.

The vision of God, as expressed in the Bible, is so elite, beautiful, thought-provoking and marvellous to imagine and at the same time, it is also seriously dangerous not because it harms the society but because it calls all the readers to share the same vision and behave in the society as though they are collaborating with God in making His vision a reality. The Church, therefore, is not called to become a mere spectator of the

works of God in history and the days ahead, instead, the Church is called to participate in God's work in reconciling the world back to Himself and bringing life and restoration into the world. The community of Christians are those who are set right with God in and through Jesus Christ to bear the *image of God* and become partners with Him in bringing the heaven down to earth – demonstrating the heavenly presence on earth.

While the Holy Spirit is the personal presence of God on earth among His people, the Church is supposed to be the stereotype of Jesus the Messiah in the world. Jesus as the true Lord and God of the world assigns His followers with the same mission that he was engaged in. The Church, therefore, does not have another vision and mission other than the mission and vision of Jesus himself. This means that the Christians are supposed to continue the mission of Jesus with the empowerment of the Spirit of God not only in announcing that God is the King of the world in and through Jesus the Messiah but also to demonstrate the *power and authority* of God in delivering the people not only from their sin but also from their socio-political and economic structures.

But there is a question. Why is there still all the evil in the world? If Jesus has declared victory over the powers and principalities of this world, then why are the tyrant rulers still running their show? Why then there is still a lot of chaos, broken relationships, disunity and darkness in the world? Isn't it true that God is not the in-charge of this world? Well, the primary answer for these questions is not simply that the world has rejected the King but those who are supposed to bring the light into the world have been imprisoned. Imprisoned not by others but because of their own worldviews, aspirations and definitions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They are imprisoned in their own thoughts and also domesticated their Scriptures, the Gospel and the Saviour to their own understanding.

## 6.1 DOMESTICATED SCRIPTURES

We can divide the world, at least, into two extremes of people. The first category comes about those who are religious and the other consists of those who are religious. In their extremism, both of these groups claim to be right and the other to be false and wrong. While secularism sees the religion as ancient, outdated and thus unfit for the present world, the religious consider the secularists as fools, blinds, and a threat to the religion. Both of them have their questions and responses to the other.



They formulate their defensive systems to counter the others and debunk the views of their opponents.

The present world, in general, always seeks freedom from religion in all areas of life. It considers religion as a prison that limits the humans' worldview, understanding and freedom of living. The reason why such an attitude was developed against the religion is the blind ritual practices of the religious groups that depicted God(s) as unstable beings with mood swings and the humans often become the victims of the angry gods. Of course, the Church in the Medieval Ages depicted Christian God in such a way that the people are brainwashed that they need to appease the anger of this to achieve salvation. They even sold the tickets to heaven. All such blind, superstitious and inhumane practices of the religious groups led to the great schism in the world.

Because of the rise of education, discovery and more scientific understanding of things, the majority of the religious have disassociated themselves with any thought of religion considering that the religion never considers human welfare and thus never helps the society to get better and develop. Because the Church was too conservative and fundamentalist to adapt to the change and accept the need of having an open-mindedness to develop the society, it seemed inevitable for the people to come out of the religion. They claimed that they are contributing to society, helping the society to get the freedom of thought, come out of their blind beliefs to see what is reality based on scientific research, reason and discoveries. Indeed, such modernism helped society to get better. They became humanistic in their understanding.

However, the sad face of modernism and postmodernism in the secular world is that it sought freedom not only from the fundamentalist orthodoxy of the religion but also freedom from God Himself. They claimed to create a society without this ancient and outdated authoritarian cosmic being who has nothing to do with humans whom the unenlightened and fools call 'god'. The atheists, agnostics and other seculars alike began to criticize the religion and unequivocally claimed that God is dead. If at all God(s) exist, he/they would exist in a parallel world that has nothing to do with the human world. Nevertheless, secularism is much humanitarian in nature, it has not debunked the ethical values completely. Yet, the problem with secularism is that since there is no God, there is also necessarily no absolute standard of ethics

since there is no absolute truth. Such an attempt to create a godless society has resulted in an inhumane society with all sorts of evil within it.

Okay, that's secularism, then what is the problem with the religious? Are they godly as they claim to be? Well, we can also divide the religious between general and Christians in particular into two extremisms viz., fundamentalists and liberals. The fundamentalists are conservative in their faith and practice. They do not get affected by the rise of secularism because they have already shut doors to adapt to the change. Some fundamentalists blindly claim that whatever they believe is true and whatever they get from their Scriptures is absolutely faultless. They either claim that modernism is entirely evil or they try to absorb the modern intelligence into their religion and claim that their religion already predicted the modern innovations and discoveries. For example, many of the fundamentalist Hindus in India claim that their ancient scriptures had already had the advanced technology, mathematics, science and education which had been recently discovered by the modern world. In their fundamentalism, the religious people try to reconcile their scriptures and the modern discoveries and the modern newspapers not to adopt the change but to claim the superiority of their religion over the modern developments.

Liberalism, on the other side, completely denies the orthodoxy of their faith in favour of postmodernism. For the majority of the world today, their scriptures must, at least, be historic and scientific to be believed in terms of modern interpretation of science and history. The liberal ones simply categorize their faith and scriptures as myth and have nothing to do with the modern world. They engage in higher critical studies in their rational approach to the scriptures. Nevertheless, liberalism has contributed a lot to the religion to understand the scriptures outside the fundamentalist worldview. Yet, it distorts the message of the scriptures because it views the scriptures as a mere piece of ancient literature and the message is insignificant and outdated.

The problem with today's Christianity is that we have domesticated the Bible in our fundamentalism and liberalism. While the liberals criticize the Bible for what it is not, the fundamentalists adjust the Bible to speak what they want. In both of these extremes, the Bible is locked to speak its message and interact with the readers in its fashion. Most of the Christians today elevate the Bible in such a way as equal to God Himself,

or, sometimes, even more than God! The reason why I have made such a statement because for them the Bible is purely literal, scientific, historic, without even a single contradiction or fiction. For them, the Bible is the eternal Word of God. Every word in the Bible is written by God and humans are mere instruments. Let me give an example. Once I happened to see a post on social media in which a certain man posted a question that began with words, “Why did Paul say....?” When I just looked at comments, I saw a lady coming up with an argument saying that the question itself is wrong because it devalues the Scripture. She said that the questioner had written “Paul said” instead of writing “God said.” When I saw that comment, immediately I smiled at her narrow-mindedness but I took that seriously because such ideas are prevalent in Christianity today.

Many such people narrow their worldview to never accept any critical question on the Bible because they think that the critical students have a lower view of the Bible. They simply avoid any criticism and are satisfied with their own reading of the Bible cutting it down to bits and pieces. The Bible is so limited that nobody wants it to speak the higher vision of God for society. Once I was listening to a discussion on the internet about how and why do Christians read the Bible. The conclusion of that discussion was that majority of the Christians today read the Bible for, at least, three purposes:

Firstly, many read the Bible for stories – for the stories about people to draw lessons from them for their personal life. Often, the stories of these heroes or zeros are read in bits and pieces to get inspiration, moral lesson and identify themselves with the person in the story. However, they will seldom read the stories of these people as characters fitting into a larger picture.

Secondly, many others read the Bible for knowing what it has to say about certain things such as angels, demons, doctrines, society, human beings, and end times. We can call it a *systematic reconstruction* approach to the Bible because it brings together many texts to speak about one particular topic. However, the danger of such an approach is that often, though not always, orphans the proof texts from their basic meaning and purpose within their context. It attempts to give meaning to the text based on the topic instead of understanding it within its structural setting.

Thirdly, a majority of the Bible readers read it for personal devotion.

They also read it for encouragement, guidance and personal application. This seems to be not so dangerous. However, the problem with this approach is that people take the texts for granted to speak whatever they want them to speak. This also leads to misquoting the Bible based on personal experiences and desires. For example, the text “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength” is taken to mean that one can do whatever s/he wants and one will never fail in his/her persuasions. But the context of that text is speaking about being content with whatever we have.

Although the above all approaches to the Bible are not entirely wrong in themselves rather they limit the Bible to a narrow scope. We fail to hear the story of the Bible in our attempts to develop systematic frameworks around it. I too understood the Bible in such a way from my childhood until I was 19 years old. This is the problem of the majority of Christians because most of the conservative Christians seldom encourage serious Bible studies. Even in Bible studies, they do not want to hear what the Bible says beyond their preoccupied beliefs. Most of the times it is said that one need not depend on the teachers, scholars and theologians to understand the Bible, instead, sit in the presence of God, read the Bible with a prayerful heart, then the Holy Spirit will reveal you whatever you need to understand. The same problem also appears in the Seminaries where some of the students never want to study because they feel that all the study is useless for God will tell them how to understand the Bible. But I have observed many who claim to have received revelations from God and speak many blunders, misquoting and misinterpreting the text. The hearers also listen as if they are deaf and dumb, never questioning them because they believe (blindly) that whatever they have heard is absolutely true because it is the word from God and not from humans.

One more problem with popular Christianity is that it has become so self-centred and individualistic in its attitude even in the interpretation of the biblical texts. Many so-called motivational speakers promote self-love, boost self-esteem and call people to accept themselves. Psychologically it is true that people need to have a good self-image to have the right behaviour in private and in public. But the danger of such interpretation of the Bible is that it has a lot to do with misquoting the scriptures. Even the texts in the Bible that speak of the nation and the society are stripped of their social sense to give a personal and individualistic meaning.

The Scriptures are often limited to the practice of personal pietism and seldom related to social action. We have all the methods of reading the Bible to satisfy our own views and to over-spiritualize the whole text to give an abstract or allegorical meaning other than what it has to say. Once I was talking with one of my church members who is very elder to me. He suddenly made a statement that made me think of it. He said that many of the times we limit the implication and relevance of the Bible to our personal faith and practice and the church worship services. Somewhere within our heart, we have some idea that the Bible is irrelevant beyond personal holiness and beyond its usage in the church services. I am not affirming it just because it is some individual's opinion but also of many Christians, especially contemporary Christian youngsters. I too shared a similar view until recent years.

The Scriptures are so domesticated that the message is often ignored and misunderstood. The domestication of the Scriptures has muted it to address the issues in society. Our domestication of the Bible has made it too narrow to have an elite vision for society. Many of the so-called popular preachers in Christianity seldom address the socio-political issues in the nation or the state. Because we domesticate the Scriptures, we are still hanging around motivational-speakers, emotional comforters, fire preachers, personal pietism and individualistic understanding of the Bible. We do not always want to come out of our views to read the Scriptures and listen to what they have to say to us. Because if we seriously engage in the study of the Bible, it may attack us on our fundamentalist grounds and may ask us to share in the higher vision of God.

## 6.2 DOMESTICATED GOSPEL

The second problem with the Church is that it has domesticated and narrowed the Gospel of Jesus Christ to mean the *good news* of individualistic salvation and an assurance of the blissful life after death. Again there is a division among the Christians about the meaning of the Gospel. For conservative evangelicals, the good news of Jesus Christ is all about the salvation of one's soul from sin and is escaping from hell to get into heaven. It is a piece of good news that is all about Jesus has died and risen again for *my* sins. For some others, the *good news* of Jesus Christ is all about caring for the poor and needy in society and helping them to get better.

The Gospel, then, has been divided as individual-salvation-escapist gospel and the social gospel. But there are not two gospels but one – the good news of Jesus Christ which is about the good news of God's Kingdom. The good news in its original sense is not that the believers will get a blissful life after death but it is good news that God has established His reign on earth as it is in heaven, in and through the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. This is good news that God has not abandoned the world but came to rescue it from the forces of evil and darkness that bound humankind. Finally, the good news is *news*. It is *news* of the beginning of a new world in and through Jesus the Messiah. Trusting in Jesus helps us to become a part of that new world and collaborating with God by becoming new human beings.

Most of the times the gospel is like, “You are a sinner and you stand as guilty before God. You are separated from God and deserve hell. But God sent His son to die for your sins and if you accept and believe in him, you can have eternal life and you will be going to heaven after you die.” We have domesticated the message of the gospel to drive the people to an emotional state of feeling miserable, hurt and sorrowful because of their sins. Sometimes, the good news of Jesus Christ is presented in fearful terms. Such presentations begin with the depiction of horrors of hell or about some terrible interpretations of the future. Often the fear is created in the hearts of the hearers and the gospel is presented as the way of escaping from that fear.

Many times, the way how Christians understand the gospel seems that it is all about the death of Jesus Christ. While some speak of Jesus' death as satisfying the anger of God and thus bringing salvation to humanity, some others speak of Jesus' death as the only way of salvation. Of course, Jesus died for our sins, He did deliver humans from the consequences of sin. But the Gospel is not all about the death of Jesus Christ. It includes the whole person and work of Jesus leading up to his death, resurrection and return. It includes his birth, his teachings, his deliverance of people, and his inauguration of the new age through his death and resurrection, and his return to consummate that new age.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is not all about individual salvation. It also has cosmic implications. It is good news to the whole world and all of the creation. It is the good news of a new life that began with Jesus and continues to flow through His disciples into a world that is living in the

shadow of death. Gospel is healing to the broken world, it is a restoration to the disturbed creation and it is news about God's intervention in human history to bring a climax to the evil.

The contemporary evangelistic mission is filled with the aggressive conversion of individuals which created a serious issue in the pluralistic world such as India. The gospel indeed is to be made known to everyone but that does not mean bringing *souls* into the Kingdom of God rather it is about bringing *humans* into God's family – a state of belongingness not only to God but also to the society. But the Church has forgotten it on a major scale. The Gospel is domesticated not to have any political, economic or social implications but only to have spiritual and individualistic relevance. Because of such *domestication* of the gospel, we have lost the connection with society and with the world.

### 6.3 DOMESTICATED SAVIOUR

Another dangerous step where the Church has majorly drifted away is with the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. Today's popular Christianity has forgotten the *real Jesus* – the Jesus whom we see in the four Gospels of the New Testament. We have lost Jesus somewhere and adopted an imaginary Jesus who is more comfortable, fitting and unchallenging to our worldview. We have ripped Jesus off from his Jewish roots, from his challenge to his world and ours. We wanted a Messiah on our terms but not on his terms.

The issue with popular Christianity today is not that it has denied the divinity of Jesus Christ but it has limited his human identity. While the people in the first century were driven with their motifs to anticipate Messiah as a warlord and rejected Jesus as their Messiah, the Church today has a lot of systematic definitions to have a *spiritual* and *pietistic* Messiah and rejected Jesus as the political Messiah bringing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

It is not a problem to say that Jesus is the God-incarnate. But the overemphasis of it led to *dehistoricizing* Jesus from his Jewishness, his sharing in the Jewish faith and hope, his break with and challenge to the *Grand National narrative* of the Jewish nation, his identity as Jewish Messiah, and his standing in the narrative of the Old Testament to bring it to a climax. We are satisfied with cosmic Christ so much that we often lessen his nature as the true Israel and as an *earthly* Jesus.

When we come to encounter the miracles of Jesus, we have a very simple statement to define all of those, “Jesus did such great things because he was all-powerful God and nothing is impossible for him.” Yes, of course, he was the visible manifestation of the God of Israel. But the miracles, signs, wonders and exorcisms do not merely point out that Jesus is an all-powerful God but his inevitability to see the humans being *dehumanized*, *desocialized* and *degraded* because of diseases and oppressing spirits. It demonstrates His power not in proving his divine nature but in bringing deliverance to those who are distressful.

We need to understand that Jesus’ healings were not merely a cure for the bodily diseases because in Jesus’ times, the sick were *desocialized* and they happened to live in a world that is uncompassionate and indifferent to them. In such a setting, when Jesus heals the people, it is restoring them to society and back to their fellowship with God. When we see Jesus hanging around the people who are tax-collectors, sinners, prostitutes, women and children, it is not as simple as saying, “Jesus loved the sinner and hated the sin.” Because in the first-century Jewish context, accepting people as such is revolutionary and Jesus is offering *identity* and *fellowship* to those who are *desocialized* by the popular culture. His way of accepting them transformed them into a whole new people.

Popular Christianity has domesticated the revolutionary teachings of Jesus into a code of ethics and religious conduct to please God and to become personally righteous. We have never seen his teachings as dismantling the politics of the world and giving the Yahwistic definition to the politics, economics and spirituality of the world. We seldom look at him as a prophetic revolutionary because we want to always hear about him as a moral teacher or a religious figure and nothing more than that.

We also domesticated the kingship of Jesus to mean Jesus’ reign in the individual hearts and not over the whole cosmos. Of course, we accept that Jesus is the Lord of the world but we somehow do not display that he is ruling the world. Otherwise, we have postponed Jesus’ Kingship and exaltation to the distant future. On his cross, we want to see Jesus dying *for our bloody sin* but never want to see him as a king dying on the cross challenging our world with his definition of kingship. As in the first-century context, we are also ashamed to speak of Jesus who died a *revolutionary death* as a *king* and yet he has exalted on his cross as the King of all the world. I do not say we are ashamed of speaking about Jesus’



death but about Jesus' death as a King.

We never try to see a Jesus who stands as a voice for the minorities. We fail to see him as someone attentive to the cries of those weak and poor whose voices have been suppressed by society. We seldom note that Jesus was a social transformer who broke with the political ideology of his day and demonstrated his politics of compassion and service. We do not try to find Jesus as a social activist denouncing and challenging the powers and wealthy classes of the society. We do not see Jesus as the disturber of the society that has gone too far from the vision of God. We do not see Jesus as a visionary who wanted to see new humanity, a new world and a new life coming upon the scene in and through his ministry.

We have all sorts of tools to divide between humanity and the divinity of Jesus but seldom understand the nature of Israel's God as being expressed in and through his human weakness, sufferings, grief and anxiety. In the humanness of Jesus, we find a God who journeys with human beings through all the ups and downs of their lives. We want Jesus always as our *personal saviour* but not as the Saviour of the world. It is not unbiblical to understand Jesus as a personal saviour but it is unbiblical to limit him for personal and individualistic salvation with no implications of such salvation to the world.

We want to hear Jesus' birth from a virgin as a sinless man but seldom understand it as the demonstration of God's faithfulness and Jesus' birth as a signpost to the new reality of the world. We always want to see Jesus as another person of the Godhead but never as the embodiment of Yahweh who has promised to return to His people. We want a Jesus who transports the believers on earth into heaven and forget the Jesus who is the presence of heaven on the earth and God making a home on earth as it is in heaven. It is heaven making a colony on earth to extend its territories beyond His space into our space.

Since we have made Jesus apolitical, uneconomical and unsocial, it is difficult for the church to continue with the mission of Jesus Christ and bear witness to him. It is not so easy for us to present him as the saviour of the world apart from our traditional views because we have limited Jesus to comfort our guilt-consciousness, as an ethical teacher and a new religious leader.

## 6.4 DANGEROUS OTHERWORLDLINESS

Personal holiness or personal ethics is very essential for a Christian life because it is the way by which one presents himself/herself to be the devoted follower of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Jesus taught his disciples to be of pure heart and abide in him. Jesus not only calls people to repent and trust in him but also looks for holiness in the personal life of his followers. We are called to be holy as the Lord our God is holy. Jesus also emphasized the people's relationship with God the Father in their prayer and asked them to pray without ceasing. Apart from Jesus, the whole message of the Bible calls people to live a holy life, be matured in Christ, and be honest, truthful, sincere, loving, trustworthy and to follow all the commandments that have been taught by Jesus Christ. In other words, moral purity and personal prayer are so inexcusable for the Christian life.

However, the Scriptures stand against the *otherworldly* religion. What does it mean by the otherworldly religion? To say in simple, *otherworldliness* refers to a practice of worship and religion that stands indifferent to society. The people seem to be so religious, everyone attends the worship and everyone seems to be so close to God. But if such closeness to God and practice of personal ethics does not affect one's social relationships and render justice and compassion, then the religion is too otherworldly to concern about the world.

The prophets in the Hebrew Bible vehemently criticized the religious people not because they did not bring the right sacrifices to God but because they failed to render justice to the poor, widows and orphans. Their religion is considered as hypocrisy, outwardly and otherworldly as they did not honour God with their actions. They were not merely called to live a sinless life but to set things right in society. We also need to understand it within the setting of one people and one nation. Being the people of God is not defined by the number of sacrifices that they bring into the temple but by their way of responding to the cries and crises within their community instead of being stagnant like idols. When people praise God for his deliverance from the tyrants, they must be careful that they do not themselves become tyrants and bring divine judgement upon themselves. They are called not only to contemplate the character of God but also demonstrate it in their personal and social lives without becoming a threat to the goodness, peace and perfection of God's creation.

Similarly, the same message is also applicable to the church today. The problem with Christians is not that they have become prayerless, not appearing in the church services and not offering the right things. The real problem is that they have become *otherworldly* in their religion and their worship. They indeed worship God in spirit and truth. They indeed spend hours in prayer and devotion. Yet their worship, their prayers, devotions, their religiousness and their *love* is not affecting their actions towards society. When I say society, I do not only refer to the society in general but also the Church in particular because even the church is the society. Everyone is religious for the sake of benefits. The religion and worship of an individual are very limited to the *personal relationship with God*. It is much narrowed to the practice of personal pietism.

There is a very less number of people who render justice to the poor, weak and vulnerable ones in society. Rendering justice does not mean punishing those who have done wrong but setting the things right where they have gone wrong. It is distributive and restorative justice. Distributive justice refers to the equal distribution of resources. Equal distribution does not mean dividing the same amount of resources for everyone rather proportionally distributing according to one's need. For instance, if there are 10 fruits with you and there are 10 persons to whom they must be distributed. Suppose one of them is not at all hungry and one other person is hungrier than any others. Distributive justice here is to give 2 fruits to the hungry person and no fruit to the one who is not. By practising such an economy, society becomes stable and with everyone being content with their resources. Restorative justice, on the other hand, refers to uplifting the people and restoring them to stability and equity. For this, those who have more than enough must give it to those who have none.

Let us think practically. There are a good number of Christian leaders who are very renowned and famous in the Christian world. They are followed and accepted by many. It includes a great number of pastors, evangelists, great preachers and other leaders in different areas. I believe that most of them are *bible nerds*. But, speaking from my knowledge, there is a very less number of speakers who really call the people for a *revolutionary life*. Most of them, as I heard, simply focus on individualistic salvation, healing, prosperity, becoming great, personal ethics, etc. But very rarely have I heard someone addressing the issues that are facing society. I do not deny that they help the people to be transformed personally but even

when there are severe issues in the society and the nation, there is very less number of them responding to such serious issues. They respond only when something happens to Christianity. They are in fear of being rejected by the majorities when they disagree with the visions of politics, economics and sociology of popular culture.

The Church has become so stagnant to speak and render social justice. We are very keen to hear the messages that speak about doctrine, faith, prayer, worship, encouragement, motivation, etc. but never want to hear the issues in society. We do not want to respond to them. We have become so self-centred and individualistic in our approach to society. There are very *fewer prophets* in the church who condemn such things and call for social action. The Church has become so otherworldly that it has become blind, deaf, dumb and statues in the society not being able to see the issues, to hear the cries and crises of the society, to speak on behalf of the poor and weak and powerless, and to act to set the things right.

The church has been called to be light and salt for the world. It is called to disseminate the taste of goodness, love, righteousness and healing into the broken world. However, the Christians have become self-centred and individualistic and thus imprisoning themselves to rescue the world through the good news of Jesus the Messiah. The Holy Spirit in the Church is also imprisoned within the individuals and not allowed to bring life, liberation and healing in the society. The Spiritual works are limited to miracles, prophecy and other spiritual gifts and very less importance is given to the social action led by the Spirit of the Lord. The attributes of the Spirit are socially active.

Remember, humanly speaking, Jesus is said to have a very intimate relationship with God. Yes, he is so spiritual and he is so righteous that his actions shook the foundations of the society, challenging the majoritarian politics, economics, religion and spirituality that finally led him to be murdered as a revolutionary. His personal relationship with God demonstrated in his ministry of liberating, healing, delivering the people and establishing the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The personal faith and personal righteousness of Jesus threatened the stagnant, indifferent and uncompassionate society. He was so spiritual that his ministry was so *earthly*, so *humane* and so *revolutionary*. He never escaped from society to form a different community in an isolated place. He set things right. As the Yahweh-incarnate, he recreated the world and

inaugurated the new age.

The Church, therefore, must come out of self-centeredness and individualism to be an active community in the society. Both within and without, the Church must work to set things right in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is not a mere call to do charitable works but a call to align with the vision of God, collaborate with Jesus and be guided by the Spirit to set the things right in the world and bring God's Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, to shine in the world and to be salt of the earth.

## 6.5 LET'S PARTNER WITH GOD

The uniqueness of the biblical faith is that the God of Israel is someone who has no rival, no equal and no one besides Him. He does not need someone to take care of His needs. He does not need defending Himself from His enemies. He has no one above Him or no other power to counsel Him, to command Him, to appoint Him, or to invoke Him to change His mind. He is an all-sufficient, all-powerful and Sovereign God of whom there was no counterpart in His world. He cannot be reduced to some image to represent His form and His character. He is without a beginning and an end.

This God is not stagnant. He is not confined to some places. Most of the time, as the people of God witnessed Him, He does not only appear in the riches, abundance and peacefully set in His place to stay away from human beings. Instead, He appears in the places where there is disorder, chaos and darkness. He enters into such realities and begins to work through that brokenness to make it beautiful, perfect and *good*. He is an *unsettling* God who works relentlessly to maintain the peace, order, and goodness in the world that which He had created.

The Bible portrays human beings as created in the image and likeness of God. He has imprinted His nature and His authority in human beings and wanted them to partner with Him in ruling the world. Human beings, therefore, are the representatives of God who communicate God's life and presence on earth as it is in heaven. It is not that humans are gods themselves rather they are just God's *image-bearers*. God did not abandon the world after creating it. He did not choose another resting place for Himself rather entered into this created world and began to rest in the cosmos which is His temple and humans are His priests, His coregents and His partners in the world. Cosmos is the residence of this God.

Whatever this God does, is human-centric because this God does not have any *divine family* as other gods have in the ancient world. If at all this God has the partners, it is humans alone. He works with them, through them and among them setting the things right. He created humans to be His partners but they failed, in the beginning, desiring *independence* from God. In the Garden of Eden, humankind had distrusted God's life of freedom and blessing by choosing to decide what is good in their own eyes. Yet this God is *an unsettling God*. He always tried to save the people and wanted to restore the world through them. This is to say, salvation is not the only humanization it is also for the restoration of the cosmos back to its original goodness and perfection.

In and through Jesus the Messiah, the humans are offered the way of salvation. His life, death and resurrection is a matter of *good news* in a broken world. God of Israel returned to the earth in the person of Jesus, worked to bring life and light into this world and went through death to liberate humans from the evil that has been incorporated within them. He rose again from the death which marked the whole new beginning and the beginning of the end of the old age. Finally, He would return not simply to deliver His people but to restore the whole cosmos and bring all the story to its climax which would open up to a whole new world where God and His people will live together and all the kings of the earth bring their glory to this dwelling place of God.

Meanwhile, the disciples of Jesus Christ, the priests and the kingdom of God are supposed to spread this good news of renewal and restoration through salvation in Jesus. The Church is also called to continue the work of Jesus and bring light and life into this world by carrying the Holy Spirit within them which is the personal presence of God. The Church is the true Israel that abides in God through Messiah and lives a life that is correspondent to God's own transforming life. The Church is also portrayed as the Bride of Christ, Body of Christ and the Temple of God. When it is said *Bride*, it points out the covenantal relationship (partnering agreement) between God and His people as developed in the Old Testament. This is to say, the Church has to carry out the vocation of God by becoming His instrument in this world so that the world can be reconciled back to God. To be Bride of Christ is not a mere symbol of purity but the symbol of partnership and the symbol of sharing in the vision of God for the world. It is to live a life as a priestly kingdom to show the world how it looks like when the world aligns with

the vision of God and allows God to come and dwell in our space.

The church as the Body of Christ does not only connote the idea of unity but also become active agents of God's wisdom and His understanding. It is to rely on the understanding of God by denying our *traditional* ways of defining good and evil on our terms. It is not about whether we should give up our free will but our free will must always be in association with God's ways of compassion, love, justice, righteousness and peace.

To partner with God means to do the things in the world that God would do. It is being saved by grace through faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Lord of the world, being set right with God to set the things right in this world and being empowered by the Spirit of the Lord to set the captives free, to bring the good news to the broken world, to be the light of the nations and to bring life to the world.

The Church must become *active* instead of being confined to the sets of personal pietism and personal relationship with God. I do not say that we need to give up practising personal faith and ethics but calling not to be limited with them. Let our relationship with God be demonstrated in our public life when we hear the cries of the people who are being unjustly treated by the powers and principalities of this world. Let us take the side of the minorities whose voices are always silenced by the rich and powerful ones. Let us counter the ideology of this world that it can live without the presence of God. Let us also counter the *Grand Narrative* of the majoritarian society whose visions and aspirations seldom concern those who are down to them. Let us become partners with God in reconstructing the broken world so that it can become beautiful, good, ordered and peaceful.

Many ask this question, "What is the need of all this? Aren't we hoping for Jesus Christ to come back and do all these things? Even if we try to act, is it possible to realize the vision of God since the Christians constitute a minority of the population?" Firstly, this is the problem of today's church that we always think that we are too insignificant to act. We are preoccupied with this thought and set back ourselves and relax waiting for the time that never comes. We do not even start to speak about it. We do not even try to find strategies for how we can realize the vision of God. Secondly, of course, the true people of God constitute a minority but our purpose and vocation is not to be mere spectators of the hope

but is called to be active participants in God's work in the world until He brings it to perfection. "Our work in Lord is not vain." (1 Cor. 15:58).

Another question is, "Where to start?" Primarily, we need to start within the church. We need to act within the church as the agents of God's life in restoring the lives of our brothers and sisters. It is not only to sympathize with the people but to counter the ideology of popular Christianity. We need to come out of our self-sufficient lives and think of the people who have become the victims of the unjust realities of this world. The Church must become a place of healing for the broken ones. The families must be restored, the relationships must be set right and the minorities must be concerned. Social actions must begin within the community by bringing an end to the injustice, corruption, cruelty, selfishness, greed, brokenness, rebellion and violence in individuals, families, and the Church. The preaching must also be transformed so that the cruciformed life is emphasized more than the prestigious, prosperous and blissful promises. "Let the justice roll down like rivers and righteousness like ever flowing streams." (Amos 5:24) Let there be a justice of distribution and restoration instead of becoming *otherworldly* in our faith and worship.

Let us not say to our brothers and sisters and the people around us, "What belongs to you is an offering to God." Let us be generous. Let us practice the lifestyle of the early church and begin to consider others as greater than ourselves. Let us welcome one another as though we are welcoming Christ. Let the presence of God be manifested in the Church so that the whole world may witness the glory of God filling all the earth. Let all flesh come to the knowledge of how the world looks like if they accept Jesus as the Saviour of the world, the Lord of all creation and the source of life.



# EPILOGUE

*In Christian terms, evangelization and humanization are not alternatives. Nor are the 'vertical dimension' of faith and the 'horizontal dimension' of love for one's neighbour and political change.*

Jurgen Moltmann

The People of God and all human beings are created in the image of God to represent God's Presence, God's Kingdom and God's life on earth as it is in heaven. We are called to become a channel of blessing in this world by trusting God's definition of good and evil, to pray, act and engage in the world for the realization of the vision of God. Although we cannot limit God to the pages of the Bible and form our own finalized conclusions about His nature and His actions, we can, at least, understand the character of this God as witnessed by the people of God in antiquity and how they presented this God in relation to the world.

As the people of God, called by His name to be an alternative community in the world, we ought to become like salt and light of the world bearing the presence of God within us to bring healing, life and

liberation to the disturbed, sorrowful and broken world. Let the vision of God become ours too. Let us begin to see the world through the lens of God and by understanding how the world has become when it is compared to the original state of goodness, order and perfection.

Our understanding of God's character defines our actions. God made Himself known to the people with His relational attributes such as compassion (parental love towards the weak and vulnerable to spare them from the danger), grace (steeping down in love), patience (slow to anger and long-enduring), loyal love (steadfastness and generosity) and faithfulness (truthfulness/stability/reliability) (Exod. 34:6). This must become our character too. We become like what we worship. Let us not choose gods and kings for ourselves and deny Yahweh as being our Lord and God. Denying Yahweh as our God is not merely following other gods but also cultivating the characters of different gods in our lives. We are not called to become stagnant idols because we do not worship such a God. Our God is not stiff and indifferent to society. He does not silence the voices of the minorities. He does not go inattentive to the people who are in a real crisis. He dismantles the majoritarian vision that lynches the poor and vulnerable lives.

Let our worship and faith become active enough to reflect the character of God in our life. Let our personal relationship with God be manifested in the areas of societies where we not only present Jesus as the Saviour but also carry out the presence of God in our lives to set the things right, to hear the cries of those who have been silenced by the majority both within and without the Church, and heal the society. Let our visions be not aligned to the majoritarian society rather be aligned to the vision of God. Let us *unmute the Bible* so that it can speak about God and His vision in and through human experiences.

We are called to live a cruciformed life. By cruciformed life, I mean a life shaped by the cross. It is understanding how God's love pushed Him to come down to meet us in our rebellion, in our horrors and lowest points emptying Himself even to the extent of dying on the cross. It is against the popular vision of *pietism* and *glory* which is about stepping a little bit higher to be loved by God. It is God becoming a human being – the perfect human being – to liberate the captives who happened to live in the bondage of the principles of life defined by the majoritarian society. These poor are the consequences of the pride, selfishness and greed of

the rich and powerful. These are those weak and vulnerable who have no one to speak on their behalf because popular spirituality is not at all connected with compassion, service and justice. When God took their side and called the society to turnaround to enter into the Kingdom that He had begun, the majoritarian society conspired and murdered Him because He attacked the Grand Narrative of the nation that wanted God to act on their terms.

Jesus called us to such *revolutionary life* – denying our individualistic and greedy self, taking up our cross and following Him. We are not called to follow a God who is only expressed in terms of richness, omnipotence, abundance and warrior-power but a *different sort of God* who came down to tread on our paths, experience the injustice, violence and indifference of the majoritarian society to its fullest. He is the God whom we find hanging on the cross dying as a revolutionary without taking a sword and inclining to the definitions of power defined by this world. He is a God who selflessly offered Himself to liberate us, to save us, and to identify with us in our mere vulnerability. When we follow such God, we might appear foolish to the world because we do not work for our benefits rather align with God in setting the things right in this broken world.

We would indeed face opposition and persecution from the majoritarian society because our faith and our hope may threaten their indifference, powers and principalities. Yet we are called to live such a life where we love God and love others selflessly that even put our lives in danger. Even then, we deny inclining to the injustice, violence and indifference of this world. The ultimate powerful weapon that may be used against us is nothing greater than *death*. But let us remember the defeat of death at the resurrection of Jesus which also gives us hope that one day we too shall overcome it through the life that is already at work in us. Therefore, our work in the Lord is never going in vain. Let us practice personal holiness and personal relationship with God yet not limiting ourselves with that. Let us move on by visualizing the heart of God for the world and partner with Him in ruling and resurrecting this world hoping for that final day when He comes again to transform and renew the whole cosmos.

Let us pray the revolutionary prayer that Jesus has taught to us which is not a mere petition to God about our problems and asking His guidance. It is a prayer that reveals the vision of God's Kingdom. It is a

prayer that hopes for the vision of God to become the reality in our world, our time and our lives. The prayer is revolutionary because it reveals what we ought to believe about God. It is a prayer that seeks the welfare of society which happens when the Kingdom of God is realized and the rulers of this world align with God's terms of power and authority. It is not about *to take us to heaven* rather asking for *heaven to come down*. It is a revelation of our vision for the world which is deeply rooted in our faith in God. When we pray it (not repeating the same words mindlessly), we express our desire to see the world not abandoned by God but restored by Him. It is also a prayer that puts us in that vision. We accept to collaborate with God in making that vision a reality. It is lining up with the politics, economics and sociology of God and practice a religion that honours His intentions.

*Pray then in this way:*

*Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.*

*Your kingdom come. Your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

*And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.*

(Matt. 6:9-13)

*I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. **I am not asking you to take them out of the world**, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so **I have sent them into the world**.* (John 17:14-18)

Let the Spirit of the Lord come upon us and into us to set the things right in this world. Let the works of the Spirit of Christ be manifested through our concerns, responses and actions in society. May the God of all wisdom grant us an understanding of how to live in His world in His ways to bring His life and salvation to the world through Jesus the Messiah and to carry out His vision and vocation bearing the image and likeness of God. Let the *broken world* be healed and *set right* by the Body of Christ. Let the Kingdom come and let the earth become a colony of heaven where the presence of God is realized and manifested until the time when Jesus returns and heaven and earth become one.





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